

"The only ability I got in a different world "Returns by Death"
I die again and again to save her.



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Chapter 69: Liar

The hard ground is predictably cold as it drags Subaru's consciousness into sobriety.

Prone, Subaru opens his eyes as he uprights himself and spits the gravelly shit and musty saliva out of his mouth. He looks about the surroundings, to find himself in a dim kind of darkness.

—It's the TRIAL room of the tomb.

Subaru's world begins in the same spot that it ended.

While relieved that he managed to come back, the entrapping feeling of facing a world which might again be hell attempts to constrict Subaru.

At these portentous and uninspiring thoughts, Subaru shakes his head in refusal.

He stands up, brushes the dirt off him, and slowly looks around the area—collapsed in a corner of the room, he finds Emilia.

Subaru: "..."

Subaru calls out and hurries over to her—or intends to, when he hesitates.

What skims through his mind is what happened before his return—Emilia, with a departing Subaru on her lap, oblivious to his expiration as she shared with him a kiss.

Subaru's fingers touch his lips, dry, as he furrows his brows.

With how he'd been puking blood, Subaru's face should have been pretty filthy at the end. There was no way he could've attempted to understand Emilia's mental state in that kiss, but it was surely nothing to leave behind good memories.

It was identical for the Subaru at death's door, for while he could reflect on the happening itself, he could manage no recollection of the physical sensation or his mentality at the time.

Subaru's very first kiss, and also his first kiss with Emilia, had been obstructed by the transience of DEATH and left absolutely no notable emotion. Subaru: “—”

Though, Subaru did not necessarily regret that fact.

His reflections on the kiss were no act of reminiscence, as his thoughts were more greatly concerned with the danger he felt about that Emilia. —The dependant-on-Subaru, fled-from-reality Emilia.

Puck wasn't showing himself, she buckled beneath the pressure from the villagers and SANCTUARY residents, and she even lost her support known as Subaru. Emilia's mind was broken.

If that Emilia was the outcome of all this, then what had happened to Emilia during all the loops previous?

Subaru: “...”

Subaru has left SANCTUARY to visit the mansion four times now. Only in the last loop did he manage to return for a reunion with her—for the other three times, what had happened to Emilia?

In each of those times, the Sizeable Hare would have already attacked

SANCTUARY.

Even assuming that Emilia maintained a stable mental state, an inability on her part to combat the witchbeast was surmisable. But, what happened to her mind?

Subaru: “Like there's any fucking 'what happened'... If that's how she turns out when I'm gone, I have to stay around...”

There is nothing in this situation to inspire optimism.

He could impose on the future, and distract himself from what was happening, but only pointlessly. For the sake of grasping the optimum future, he must always proceed while supposing the worst future.

The world would prepare what was for Subaru the cruellest, most unreasonable fate.

If so, then naturally the problems of Emilia, Beatrice, Elsa and Roswaal, would all arranged in the most difficult format for Subaru.

Subaru: “What, I have to do is...”

Save Emilia's mind, save SANCTUARY's people from the Sizeable Hare, save his buddies in the mansion from Elsa. —Rather the precipitous path.

—Could he do it?

The question comes from inside him, as the weak him prepares escape routes, excuses, safeguards.

—There isn't any can or can't do, all there is is to do it.

Subaru bares his teeth at that weak him, stating his resolve so as not to back out of his pledge.

He just had to try as many times he needed to pick out the obstacles, clarify the win conditions, assemble a chronology, and discern what was the best usage of his time.

Even should Subaru's heart abrade with each failure, if doing it would give him a future to grasp, then that was gratification. Even saying hypothetically, that it meant he'd experience things he'd rather not.

And so—

Subaru: “—Emilia. Are you okay?”

He reaches out, jostling the shoulder of the fallen, lovely girl.

Her eyelids tremble at Subaru's touch, and Emilia's consciousness returns from the TRIAL to reality.

Her eyes open, their amethyst gleam reflect Subaru, tears arise within seconds, and rejecting her past Emilia clings to Subaru.

Returning the support-craving Emilia embrace, pledging in words to become her support, Subaru further in his heart vows firm pledges.

—He'll protect Emilia entirely, and save absolutely everyone.

And it'd be no other than him. Because this was what Natsuki Subaru needed to do.

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Subaru gets to organizing the chaotic information from the lend of last loop.

The most important info was probably the stuff relating to Roswaal L. Mathers.

Roswaal knew about Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH.

While his knowledge wasn't extensive enough to know that DEATH was the trigger, he was aware that Subaru was REDOING.

Subaru can't tell whether he found out after coming to SANCTUARY, or whether he's known since some time earlier, but most likely the information had been writ in Roswaal's gospel.

Subaru had not managed to collect Roswaal's gospel last loop.

Assuming it had been on Roswaal's person, it would've wound up alongside Roswaal inside the Sizeable Hare's stomach. And even had it been inside the recuperation hut, Subaru had not been left with the mental reserves to go blasting in to check.

Thus, he could not get his nosy nose in deep enough to read the text of the gospel.

—What was Roswaal's goal here, ultimately?

If it was to act in accordance with the gospel's writ, then what reason was there for him to abandon his life at the end? —The answer to that, too, was probably in the gospel's text.

Most likely, Roswaal was putting his life on the line to adhere to the gospel's writ.

While Subaru doesn't know just what form the writ of Roswaal's gospel takes, most likely it is identical to Betelgeux's in being a signpost to reach the desired future.

Should circumstances deviate from the cult gospels' writ, Betelgeux could to a certain extent use his own judgement to interpret the text, and strive to

ultimately reach a coherence.

This differs from Roswaal's case.

Capable of acting with REDOS in mind, should a future deviating from the writ visit Roswaal, he would expend his own life to make that incorrect timespan a non-occurrence.

Betelgeux, who played by ear to deal with deviations to the writ.

Roswaal, who permitted no deviation to the writ, and strived to protect its writings as definite.

Both shared the status of being troublesome opponents who owned gospels, and their motivations to actualize their gospels' texts were identical, but their stances in approach were entirely different.

Between Betelgeux's manner of reliance, and Roswaal's manner of reliance, Subaru inevitably finds Roswaal's as being the worse.

—The issue here is the text of Roswaal's gospel.

If it's written so far as the conclusions to the issues confronting SANCTUARY and the mansion, then disaster is going to unfold countless times before reaching Roswaal's desired outcome.

The snow in SANCTUARY last loop was probably an action Roswaal took to actualize the gospel's writ. Meaning, that snow was an event that should be coming every loop.

That Subaru hadn't encountered it before was because he had never managed to return to

SANCTUARY after leaving to visit the mansion.

Roswaal's snowfall in SANCTUARY was a means to isolate Emilia. What on earth was the meaning of doing this?

The unbearable pressure on Emilia should've been more than enough to torment her, even without this roundabout tomfoolery. With her strong sense of responsibility, Emilia would well perceive the expectations of those around her. While bracing herself against her feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, she would repeatedly challenge the TRIAL.

And it all goes on, to the point that should Subaru not be around to be her prop, she loses her foundational supports and goes bonkers.

Making Emilia go bonkers is probably Roswaal's intention.

But if Emilia should stop acting FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S SAKE, SANCTUARY will not be freed. SANCTUARY not being freed means there is no option of escape in response to the coming Hare. There are many contradictions between Roswaal's actions and his attitude toward Emilia.

And most important were the words Roswaal spoke at the end, before being eaten.

—Scour away everything except what is truly most important to you. Do that, and you will be like me.

Leaving aside whether Subaru wanted to be like Roswaal, probing into the underlying implications of that statement would mean: Roswaal had scoured away everything except that important to him, and now stood there.

His resolve was strong enough that he had freely sacrificed his life—there is probably no room for doubt on this.

If Roswaal forces compliance to the writ, drives Emilia into isolation, and secures his desired state of affairs, he'll acquire that one and single important thing of his or whatever the fuck.

Otherwise, what was the real motive behind him announcing those words to Subaru? Regardless—

Subaru: “Letting go's a no fucking thanks.”

Emilia was important.

But of course, those Subaru wished to protect and wished to have at his side were many and many more in number, too numerous for him to count.

Should there be a single loss in Subaru's constrained world, it would forever turn colourless. Greedy and self-centered, Subaru could almost certainly not withstand that.

And so, he could not comply with Roswaal's words. Subaru: “Roswaal, I—am not, going to be like you.”

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Subaru comforts a crying Emilia until she falls asleep, takes her along and exits the tomb.

Things go as usual with everyone being surprised at Emilia's situation and failing of the TRIAL, and first wanting to switch settings to Lewes' house to get Emilia in bed.

Along the way there was a little chapter where Garfiel's atmospheric considerations and put-on cheeriness conversely felt painfully pathetic, and Subaru noticed Lewes' meaningful gaze on him, but he didn't mention either topic.

The first one he had purposefully not referenced for the sake of confirming something. As for the second, Subaru already sort of knew what the meaning

behind that gaze was.

Garfiel: "'M gonna be borrowin' yer fer a bit."

They entrust sleeping Emilia to Ram, and just after everyone leaves for the night, Garfiel calls Subaru to a stop. Having anticipated this, Subaru responds with obedient affirmation as he follows behind the shorter guy, heading into the forest outside SANCTUARY.

Subaru can't determine whether the spot Garfiel leads him to is the same one as last time, but he does deduce that Garfiel's expression as he looks at Subaru is indeed exactly identical.

Eyes blazing, Garfiel glares at Subaru.

Clearly different from his attitude after leaving the tomb, and obviously hostile toward Subaru. Naturally, the first question out his mouth will be—

Garfiel: "Yer bas..."

Subaru: "You bastard, what did you see in the tomb... yeah?"

His nose scrunches and a vein bulges from his forehead, when the very words he was about to speak get thrown right back at him. Garfiel's eyes widen.

When his expression shows he's been caught off guard, it does away with his more severe impression, letting a kind of puerility peek through. Mysterious.

Garfiel immediately shakes his head at Subaru and his one shut eye, clicking his fangs to compose himself.

Garfiel: "'S creepy, but if yer know what's up 's makes things go quick. No

hidin' nothin', n' speak everythin' honest. If yer don't wanna be havin' a bad time, that is."

Subaru: "Yeah. I've got lots of things I wanna check too, busy guy I am. —I'm fine with answering your questions, but can I be getting my questions answered here, too?"

Garfiel: "D'yer ser'sly think yer in any position t'bargain 'bout anythin'? My amazin' self's in th'position of eatin' yer whole, and yer in th'position of throwin' out meat that ain't you t'keep from gettin' eaten. 'S a MEE-JEE LOSES BROTHER OLD, PUTS BROTHER YOUNG TO FORE."

Subaru: "Out of all the sayings you've said, there's the nastiest one, right there."

Shrugging, Subaru lowers his gaze and elects for silence.

Garfiel might be impatient, but he's still not rushing Subaru. Subaru takes a deep breath, deciding how he should answer.

Subaru: "Inside I took the TRIAL. I saw my past."

Garfiel: "—! So y'did have th'fucking qualifications... Then, yr'results're..."

Subaru: "Failed. Accepting or denying your past isn't something you can just do that easily I

mean with Emilia, it'll be the same thing."

Half-truth, half-lie, Garfiel's reactions to each peek through.

Garfiel's face pales in hearing that Subaru took the TRIAL, but after learning that it didn't amount to success he slumps his shoulders, eased.

Subaru: "Well you sure look pretty fucking relieved." Garfiel: "Eh?"

Subaru: "I am thinking, he sure accepted Emilia's failure, and accepted that SANCTUARY will not be freed, while looking pretty fucking happy about it."

Brows furrowed, Garfiel gives a sniff as if starting to catch on. He stoops his posture slightly, glaring up at Subaru.

Garfiel: "Y'bastard, what 'n yr'past... no, what n'th'TRIAL did yer fuckin' hear?"

Subaru: "SANCTUARY's background, some of the underlying circumstances. Also, about you and Lewes-san, I guess."

Garfiel: "—! No, w... you, my..."

...past is something you know, is what Garfiel's probably going to continue with. Subaru cuts him off by shaking his head.

Subaru: "I've got no clue what you saw in your past. Do have an idea why you're keeping quiet about having taken the TRIAL though."

Garfiel: "...T'already know this much."

Subaru: "This's coming with my speculations too." something something you're cool to get mad because it's meanie speculation.

In this world, Subaru and Garfiel have only known each other for one day.

The majority of the information Subaru would acquire by interacting with Garfiel was really not anything he should be getting to hear yet.

The same goes for information about the legitimate Lewes Meyer, sleeping in the experiment site.

Thus Subaru was attempting to get through this by saying he had opportunity to learn these things in the tomb, handily utilizing the TRIAL and hinting at Echidna's existence.

Subaru couldn't think of any new information he would acquire or new actions he would take as a result of this conversation with Garfiel.

Right now all he wanted as for this talk to be over. But—

Subaru: “—Y'know, why won't you reattempt the TRIAL?” Garfiel: “—”

Garfiel tilts down his head, with no intention of showing Subaru his expression. His arms dangle at his sides, his wary posture loose and without strength.

And so Subaru judges that no immediate attack is coming.

Subaru: “I really have to feel there's no consistency with you. You pressure Emilia for her to free SANCTUARY, and then you're fucking relieved when she fails. But that said, if you're sincerely trying to blockade SANCTUARY's freedom, your methods are half-measures.”

If he wasn't ultimately considering the consequences, Garfiel could just shapeshift into beast form and kill Subaru and Emilia.

The sentiments of the evacuees and Roswaal and the others would of course plummet, but if Garfiel's goal was truly to hinder SANCTUARY's freedom, then this method would be reliable and quick.

But still, until things hit their absolute last moment of being dicey for Garfiel—until Subaru crosses the line of having the evacuees escape SANCTUARY or some other similar thing—he doesn't do it.

—There is still some boundary line inside Garfiel that Subaru doesn't know.
Subaru: “I'm thinking to hopefully get your help.”

Garfiel: “—Do, n't say th's stupid crap.”

Garfiel raises his head, his usual vigour completely absent from his face as he shakes his head.

Garfiel: “Just like yer said, me and you ain't got int'rests that align. My amazin' self ain't actively gettin' in yer way, but I ain't actively helpin' either. 'M neutral. Neutral, 's fine.”

Subaru: “You do realise that how that position crazy doesn't suit you?”
Garfiel: “It ain't a thing of suit'n er not suitin'. 'S necessary so it's what I do.”

Garfiel annoyedly kicks at the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust as he turns his back to Subaru.

Garfiel: “'F th'half-witch beats th'TRIAL th'n that's that. My amazin' self does understand what with yer bein' caught inside, you have to beat th'TRIAL if yer gonna get out. —But, th'question of whether I'm leavin' th'opened SANCTUARY's entirely somethin' else.”

Subaru says nothing.

Garfiel: “If yer gonna leave, go ahead'n get out. But don't yer try doin' anything here. Don't tresspass into our shit any more th'n yer already fuckin' have. Y'stay by that, and my amazin' self ain't doin' anything.”

Subaru: “Even if I told you that outside, your help is necessary?”

Garfiel: “...Yer lot couldn't possibly give what my amazin' self's after. N'here's where th'talk with me ends. Make sure t'pull no goddamn meddling.”

Ultimately not listening to Subaru's objections, but still rather rational in his conversation, Garfiel leaves the scene.

Garfiel's shown strong rejection in his talks with Subaru up until now, but this time alone he didn't flip out.

Just where did the difference, and his motives lie? Subaru: “I've got mountains of things to think over... but,”

Sticking his finger in his black hair, the complicated load of information in his head leads Subaru to stop mulling over it.

Although he'd love to sort it, organize it, arrange it, and have it lead to an answer. Subaru: “This included, thinking over everything alone's gonna get me nowhere.”

Should Natsuki Subaru stray inside the labyrinth of thought, he would again be caught in a spiral of negativity. To prevent that from happening, what Subaru needed now was—

Subaru: “Guess it's time to rely on you again...”

The single person in the world to whom Subaru could reveal his worries, and their thoughts.

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As if spurred by some unassailable emotion, Subaru's feet hasten.

After parting with Garfiel, Subaru's walk immediately shifts into a dash. Breath ragged, brow sweaty, pupils wavering, Subaru runs.

His destination is only, visible under the moonlight, the tomb's inside.

It's after that last conversation.

Having stated he would not interfere with Subaru's actions, Garfiel presents no obstruction. There is no one to rebuke Subaru as he speeds again for the inside of the tomb.

Having reached the entryway, Subaru stops still as his sleeve rigorously wipes away the sweat.

He takes deep breath after deep breath to settle his winded panting, facing forward as he peers into the darkness of the tomb.

What he has business with is inside—the abyssal castle in a dream, Echidna's realm. Subaru: “If you wish... that you want to know...”

You'll be invited in, the white-haired witch had explained to Subaru.

With his attitude clinging and reliant, Subaru came here trusting in that statement.

The things he wanted to ask, wanted to talk about, wanted to deliberate

about together, wanted help to reach an answer for, were numerous enough to be a mountain.

Those things he could only reveal to the Witch of Greed, he wished to reveal to be given a way.

What he needed to do, and what he wanted to do coincided.

Now all he wanted was a method to actualise it, acquired by process other than deliberating over it alone.

Subaru: “—”

Going to Echidna's castle, spewing all his doubts and worries to her, clinging to her kindness, did make Subaru feel somewhat pathetic.

The possibility that revealing everything to Echidna would break the prohibition, and again drown SANCTUARY in Envy's shadows, did prompt his legs to tremble.

But regardless, Subaru had hope.

That the Witch's guidance would be the clue to breaking through this impenetrable dead-end of fate. Subaru: “Right now... I should be meeting the requirements.”

He was this lost on what to do.

He was this willing to do anything he could.

If the present Subaru was no desiring, wanting Apostle of Greed, then what was he?

Innumerable times would he freely surrender his life. If sacrificing his pride was all it took to settle this, then he would relinquish it.

Because the shameful, pathetic, impotent and ignorant Natsuki Subaru, could manage no better than this.

Subaru: “Counting on you, Echidna!”

Steadying his breathing, Subaru silently motivates himself to finally take the first step into the tomb.

Having already accepted him as a challenger once tonight, he enters the space for conducting the TRIAL—and gazing over the room, proceeds towards its centre.

Subaru: “Really winging it on what spot and what formalities it needs, but...”

The second time Subaru was invited to the dream, other than frantically desiring an answer, he should have been in the same prone posture he had right after RETURNING BY DEATH.

It doesn't seem there are any notable, dedicatory kinds of requirements.

Either way, Subaru kneels down on the spot with his hands linked and eyes shut.

In his mind he envisions the white witch, calling out to her with enumerations of his emotions. Subaru: “—”

It continues, the time passing as Subaru waits in silence.

He can feel the tomb's cold air caressing his skin, yet regardless also feels the sticky, cold sweat on his brow.

He desired. Desperately. He wanted. Earnestly.

If he wanted this much, desired this much, yet still wasn't achieving it, then.

—Greed perhaps meant an avarice far too immense for human capacities.

Subaru: “—u?”

Just before the faintheartedness can sink in is when the darkness beneath Subaru's eyelids abruptly seems to glow with encroaching white. —Actually no, that isn't a 'seems'.

Subaru: “—”

The white light assaults his vision, steadily and steadily consuming the pitch-dark world.

Before he knows it his kneeling body now lies on its side, and he feels his consciousness estranging from reality as it is pulled into another world.

—The invitation to the castle in a dream has begun.

To the castle where Echidna awaits, where this time truly, he wishes to hold a conversation for the purpose of grasping the future.

Amid a hazing consciousness, on only that one single thing does Subaru brood.

<—Witness the uncomeatable present.>

The moment he falls unconscious, he could feel that he heard this.

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A grogginess jolts Subaru's nerves. He doesn't know what happened.

The sobering of his consciousness hits suddenly. Almost as if switching a television channel.

Dragged along by the tumult of changing from one channel to one completely different, Subaru's awareness switches.

Subaru feels a sensation reminiscent of this right after RETURNING BY DEATH.

The discrepancy between the grisliness of the world where he dies, and the conditions he reaches after RETURNING BY DEATH, is something which carves a sense of awriness into his consciousness, his body, and of course even his soul.

Subaru: <—>

In attempting to speak, Subaru realises that he cannot.

He tries to put his hands his his throat, to belatedly notice that he lacks the sensation of having either a throat or hands.

Subaru: <—?>

Neither arms nor legs, eyes nor mouth, nor even a body exist for the present Subaru.

His consciousness alone floats in space, looking panoramic down at the world,

as if he had become only a single point of vision.

It was an unnatural feeling, like being in a dream without any physical flesh.

That he regardless feels this is not the first time he's been in this state is perhaps exactly because the sensation is much like that of dreaming.

That manner of thought leads Natsuki Subaru to try disconnecting his perceptions from the scene before him.

However, this is impossible.

Disembodied Subaru is not permitted to turn his head, nor close his eyes.

All he can do is watch—watch this scene before him, forcibly burned into his awareness.

???: “—ar.”

The voice is hoarse, and quiet.

So frail, that it's difficult to make out what it's saying. However,

Subaru: <—>

He intuitively perceives.

This is Bad, senses Subaru's instinct.

That was a voice he must not hear. This was a thing he must not notice.

In there was a matter which he must not know.

But no matter how hard he thinks this, the scenery before him remains unchanging. It won't even disappear for him. It merely forces that CONSEQUENCE on Subaru, engraving it in him.

???: “Liar... liar, liar liar liar liar liar liar...”

The word takes definite form as it repeats, teariness joining the unending murmur.

It's a painful scene. Packed with too much grief to deafen out. Watching this, hearing this, was the absolute in suffering.

Subaru: <—> Why was he here?

Why did he have to notice this?

He erred. He messed up. He blundered in judgement. He ought not have noticed. He ought not have known. He ought not have been informed.

—Should he not think otherwise, then, he.

???: “Liar, you liar! Subaru, you... liaaAARR! LIARRRRRR!!”

A torrent of tears streaming from her amethyst eyes, Emilia screams.

As if accusing a betrayer, as if rejecting the nightmare before her, dishevelled her hair as if a child, Emilia screams as if in frenzy.

—In front of Rem lying on the bed, with a dagger jutting from its throat in suicide, before a hysteric Emilia there lies Subaru's corpse.

Chapter 70: What Comes After Hell

—What on earth was he watching here? Subaru: <—>

Screaming shrill as she cries Subaru's name is Emilia.

And leaned face-down on the bed is Subaru's body, devoid of strength, its snap-open eyes barren of life.

Naturally. With its throat wrecked by a dagger, and with that much bloodshed, it couldn't possibly be alive.

This was the rare experience of looking down at your own corpse and death.

It was as if he had exited his dead body as a ghost and been made to watch the following spectacle, this twisted sensation.

While the majority of that sensation was inaccurate, the fundamental part was not.

—What Subaru was being shown was unmistakably the scene after his death. Subaru: <—>

The room's furnishings, the people present here, and the atrocious form of his dead self. Putting these together, Subaru realises just what scene he is being shown here.

This was after subjugating Cardinal of Sin Betelgeux Romanée-Conti and saving Emilia, when he first learned of Rem's forfeiture, and the results of his impulsive deed.

Subaru had been overjoyed, felling the White Whale, repelling Sloth, saving Emilia and the Arlam Villagers. But learning immediately after that Rem was gone had sent him plummeting into the pit of the Abyss.

He sped in the carriage to reach the Royal Capital—where at Crusch Karsten's manor, after seeing the sleeping Rem, then confirming that her consciousness was absent and nobody remembered her, Subaru instantly committed suicide by stabbing himself through the throat.

It was a knee-jerk reaction, with not a single moment of deep consideration put into it.

He had merely done it to reject the scene before him. Done it to take back what had been lost, clinging to RETURN BY DEATH in an attempted to redo the past.

—However, his rash deed came to no success. The place he returned to after suicide was immediately before he stabbed his neck, already after reuniting with the sleeping Rem.

RETURN BY DEATH's save point had updated.

Heartlessly it stole Subaru's means of recovering Rem, again sending Subaru plummeting into the depths of despondency and despair.

He afterwards firmed his resolve to recover Rem, pledging for her reawakening and now somehow managing to keep standing, but—

Subaru: <This isn't, about me. ...This doesn't have anything to do with me. I don't know this... I couldn't know anything about this!>

He has never seen this scene before.

Well of course. Subaru had already died in this universe.

Even Subaru, who possessed means to return to the world after losing his life, did not comprehend what happened to worlds after he died. Or no, could not comprehend.

It was not until this moment that he had ever recognized it.

For a Subaru who had died and then returned to walk along different path, successfully evading a dead-end world, said world could bring him no information except WHY DID HE DIE. Nothing more than a crossing point.

Determining these world as checkpoints for reaching his ultimately desired future, and having decided to utilize RETURN BY DEATH, he had regarded even the present world as no more than a waypoint.

Now—that was crumbling.

Subaru: <Stop. Stop stop stop stop stop stop stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it please stop!> Rejecting the scene before him, Subaru shrieks in silent voice.

But without a throat he produces no sound, he has no hope of averting his eyeless gaze, and he cannot cover his non-existent ears. Into Subaru the world proceeds to engrave these consequences.

—Punishment, for the careless deed he committed.

???: “Emilia-sama, what—!”

Hearing Emilia's wails, a new character steps into the horrendous scene.

A fresh butler outfit garbs his toned body, his stride giving no indication of the injuries on this old man—Wilhelm.

He swoops into the room, unwittingly falling silent at the sight before him.

—So even the Sword Demon Wilhelm makes faces that utterly dumbfounded. Seeing Wilhelm from straight-on, Subaru gets hit with that out-of-place thought.

That was how much Wilhelm's expression in seeing Subaru's cadaver deviated from usual, unable to conceal his shock.

Wilhelm: “What in the world has... no, presently... Subaru-dono!” But

Wilhelm's disarray only lasts an instant.

He shakes his head to promptly suppress his bafflement as he dashes to the crumpled Subaru's side.

Emilia remains clinging to the limp body, oblivious to Wilhelm. Emilia: "Subaru... Subaru... you, liar... you said we'd, be toge, ther..." Wilhelm: "Emilia-sama, I beg your forgiveness—!"

Emilia condemns Subaru's betrayal like a curse, when Wilhelm pushes her aside and away from the corpse. Without anything supporting her body she hits the floor, but Wilhelm redirects his instant of attention toward Emilia back to Subaru, wet with fresh and incredible bloodstains as Wilhelm begins resuscitating him.

Wilhelm: "—"

Expression grave, Wilhelm sheds his jacket, using it to cover Subaru's throat as he unhesitatingly yanks out the dagger. Blood spouts to muddy Wilhelm's wicked visage, but he goes without even blinking as he immediately plugs the wound.

The bleeding stopped, Wilhelm presses down on Subaru's stilled chest, stimulating his heart. Wilhelm: "Felis! Felix! Come quickly!! Emergency! Hurry!!"

Aiming his roars outside the room, Wilhelm applies pressure to Subaru's wound as he continues the resuscitation effort. However, the volume of shed blood is incredibly great. His limbs and face absent of colour, that Natsuki Subaru's soul no longer remains here was a fact apparent to anyone. Regardless, Wilhelm makes no motion to stop.

Felis: "Old Will, what're you yelling ab—hk"

Wilhelm: "Hasten, Felix! A knife's stabbed his throat! Every second is critical!"

Felis: “—!”

Felis dashes into the room at the summons. He nods instantly to Wilhelm's instructions, cloaking his hands in a blue aura as he sends healing magic into the fallen Subaru's body.

On the face of the always-unflappable Felix there dwells a seriousness Subaru has never seen before, which he witnesses as he looks down at his own soulless husk.

Subaru: <Just, stop. ...You can't. It won't work. You can't save him any more...> Anything they could do would be pointless.

Subaru had no memory of being rescued after attempting suicide.

Natsuki Subaru impulsively stabbed a dagger through his throat in rejection of reality, irreparably wounded the hearts of many people, and while feeling no chastisement in the least for that, disappeared.

Those were the facts. The dedicated efforts of these two would come to no conclusion.

Wilhelm: “You shan't pass on! I shan't allow you pass on! If I am to lose a benefactor in this fashion, I could not live with the shame!”

Felis: “Why'd he have to go pulling this stupidity now...”

Putting pressure on the wound, Wilhelm shouts with tenacity. Even while spitting his agitated remark, Felis casts the kindest magic in the world.

This sight, their ripples of emotion, slam Subaru about the heart. But, no matter how hard they try—

Felis: “—”

Wilhelm: “Felix! Why!? Why have you stopped healing!? Should this go on...”
Felis: “It's over, Old Will. —His soul isn't anywhere any more.”

Wilhelm closes in on Felis. Pushing him away, Felis removes Wilhelm's jacket and uses a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe Subaru's wound. The cut closes cleanly, this body no longer conceivable as having sustained fatal injury, returned back to the several-minutes-prior healthy Subaru.

But neither did its loads of spilt blood nor departed soul remain inside. Looking down at the pale, dead Subaru, Wilhelm shakes his head.

Wilhelm: “Why... why is this! Why, so easily... Subaru-dono, you were...!”

Slammed with a fist, the floor cracks open.

The blood mixed with the bits of broken floor happens because Wilhelm's punch split his fist open as well. Blood dripping from his knuckles, Wilhelm's incredible regret leads him to bite his lip open.

Opposite the clearly emotional Wilhelm, Felis too looks down at Subaru with a pained expression. His ears droop as he gazes at the not-exactly-peaceful dead Subaru.

Felis: “...Weakling, coward. You just abandoned eeeveryone dear to you. ...Pushing all the pain, and all the suffering onto everybody... are you satisfied nyow?”

Too severe to be sarcasm, too compassionate to be condemnation.

The complexity of the emotion hidden in Felis' voice is beyond the comprehension of the current Subaru consciousness, thoughts frozen.

But, Wilhelm and Felis' attitudes lead him to clearly understand.

—Subaru had stricken the two of them with something irreversible. Subaru: <—>

His mind stalls absolutely. What was he being shown here?

He knew. He knew far and long ago what he was being shown. He was being shown sin.

Wilhelm: “—Emilia-sama?”

The puzzlement in Wilhelm's tone as he suddenly calls her name is likely because Emilia's sobbing cuts off, and her body stops its trembling.

Pain runs through Wilhelm's expression. He had only just experienced the bereavement himself, so how much of a shock would this be to Emilia, who was even closer to Subaru? That breed of expression.

The old man closes his eyes once, firm. He stands up.

Then he walks over to the side of the collapsed Emilia, reaching out to upright her.

Wilhelm: “I sincerely apologize for what I have done, Emilia-sama. However, your body shall suffer harm, should you remain like this. Please, with care.”

Emilia: “—told me.” Wilhelm: “Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “And he told me he loved me!”

Still on her side as she hugs her knees, Emilia curls into a ball as she screams, crying.

That is behaving like a child, was not a reprimand anyone present could voice.

Wilhelm's brows knit as if enduring pain, and even Felis averts his gaze, unable to bear watching Emilia's heartbroken grief.

When— Felis: “Whh?”

Baffled, Felis' eyes and mouth open wide as a dumb noise slips from his throat. Guided by his voice, Wilhelm follows Felis' gaze, and is stunned.

—Before the two of them, Subaru's supposedly-perished body has uprighted itself. Subaru: <—!?!>

This spectacle transcending comprehension shocks even Subaru's consciousness.

His uprighted flesh stretches out its limbs with the choppy movement of a mechanical doll, standing up with its head still bent ninety-degrees sideways, eyes slowly opening.

Its unfocused gaze, its light-bereft pupils, leer over the room. Wilhelm: “Fehl...”

Felis: “Impossible! His body was unmistakably dead! The resuscitation failed!”

Wilhelm clings to hope as he calls on Felis, when Felis interrupts by guessing Wilhelm's intentions and shouting his thoughts.

Hearing this, Wilhelm immediately determines what to do. That is—

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, forgive me—!”

Even without a blade, the Sword Demon suffers no detriment to his skill.

Wilhelm crouches down to retrieve his jacket discarded on the floor, twists up this thing wet with Subaru's blood, and uses his whole body to spear it forward like a lance.

Riding the speed and heavy with blood, this thing drilling through the air was a cloth spear. Using this impromptu craft, Wilhelm strikes a preemptive blow against the standing Subaru.

His aim is true, as the jacket's point jabs straight to pierce Subaru's face and—
Wilhelm: “—Won't.”

—The cascade of shadows bursting up from underfoot consumes the jacket, vanishing Wilhelm's attack.

Witnessing this and its complete lack of forewarning, Wilhelm promptly pulls back his arm—but he cannot avoid damages. Three fingers on his right hand have, alongside the jacket, been plucked off at the first knuckle.

Jumping back, clicking his tongue, blood dripping, Wilhelm takes distance from the stock-still Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Felix! Take Emilia-sama and leave immediately! I shall keep him stalled!” Felix: “Don't have a swor... all I've got's a dyagger!”

Tumbling back to a corner of the room, Felix tosses the dagger at his hip to Wilhelm. He catches it with his left hand, twisting his wrist to draw it from its scabbard.

Wilhelm: “Feels irregular with short weapons,” He mutters.

Wilhelm: “Flee the manor, and on Crusch-sama's instructions—no, that won't work now. Felix, go by your judgement. Bring the Knights here.”

Felix: “This'll be dicey on your own, Old Will?”

Wilhelm: “Something equal to the White Whale, potentially... had been cradled inside Subaru-dono.”

Estimating the combat strength of his opponent, Wilhelm swallows his breath as a cold sweat rises on his skin.

Faced with a plainly wary Sword Demon, Subaru's arms remain dangling limp, his gaze puttering about as he looks at nothing, his upper body swaying unsteadily from side to side.

This thing has no rational thought. Most likely its awareness is patchy too.

The problem here is that regardless of being in this state, it's aware enough for self-defence.

Wilhelm continues the fierce glaring match with the eldritch-turned Subaru.

Meanwhile, watching all of this, what's caught up in a storm of question marks is Subaru's consciousness.

The situation was clearly changing from what it had been.

Shown this sin, his heart destroyed, and now Subaru was subject to watching something even more incomprehensible in this universe after his death.

What in the world was this scene.

Did this actually happen? If not, what was the point of it? Why exactly was his consciousness here, now?

He didn't understand anything. Understood not a thing at all, but— Wilhelm: “Felix! To Emilia-sama!”

Felis: “I said I got it! Emilia-sama, come he—!?”

Wilhelm urges Felis to hurry, and answering that insistence Felis cuts across the room to hurriedly help the fallen Emilia up. However, a quake instantly

rocks Felis' expression.

Because,

???: “—How dare you make Lia cry.”

Birthing white haze, a small silhouette dives down to the centre of the room.

Grey-furred, tail as long as its body, small enough to fit in the hand, but the pressure it exerts is intense enough for the thing to be mistaken for a great and ferocious beast.

His first appearance in a long time, the little spirit floats in the room's centre, looking down at Subaru. His expression carries a thorniness beyond simple comprehension, his muttered words laced with hatred.

Puck: “Factoring the barbarism of that body's owner alongside, you're deserving of myriad deaths— you damned witch.”

Frigid bloodlust floods the cramped room. Wilhelm exhales in white. Seeing Puck morph his bloodlust into spearpoints of ice, his expression stiffens.

Wilhelm: “Spirit... Emilia-sama has, not possibly...”

Puck: “Right now, Lia's unconscious. As stated by contract, I'll act on my own judgement. I'm not forgiving the witch. I'm protecting Lia. —That man who made Lia cry, I'm not forgiving either.”

Wilhelm: “But! If we fight here and now, the casualties—”

Puck: “Violated your pledge, and froze my Lia's heart. —It's time enough I end

you.” Ignoring Wilhelm's complaints, Puck's frigid murder more takes more definite form.

The room fills with white mist, freezing the surroundings, absolutely everything here beginning to die. In a world where even breath could turn to ice, entirely bathed in Puck's enmity, is Subaru.

Subaru raises his head, for the first time seeing Puck.

Those eyes blind to everything gaze at the floating Puck. When his eyelids twitch. And,

Subaru: “—”

He snickers.

Subaru's dead body crooks its cheeks, and snickers at seeing Puck. With its face virulent, contorted, and derisive.

Subaru: <—Sto,>

Seeing this much, Subaru's consciousness cries out prior the definitive calamity. But, his cry achieves nothing.

Sweeping his little arm from up to down, Puck births a small-scale glacier inside the room, its absolute zero threatening to consume Subaru's corpse. Shadows burst up from below to beat the ice back—and a torrent of mana throws the small room into disarray, catching Wilhelm and even Felis in the whorling nexus—to explode. Shrieks and wails, freezing ice, cracking and crumbling, all peel out as white demise and black despair intermingle to shroud out everything.

Subaru: <—!!>

Like electricity cut, the world vanishes of all colour.

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Subaru: “—buh”

The pain of his face smacking against the ground leads Subaru's consciousness into awakening. His jaw strikes the damp floor, Subaru tearing up at the stinging pain as he shakes his head.

And, promptly looking up, he speedily looks about the surroundings. — Nothing is off. Subaru: “I-inside the, tomb...”

Cold air and dark space, damp floor with the stench of mould. Definitely the tomb.

Confirming this much, Subaru next clenches and unclenches his hands, checking there is nothing out of place with his limbs. His ragged breathing steadily begins to settle down, pushing deep breaths out his lungs to forcibly regain his calm.

The trembling sensation in the core of the gut alone does he fail to dispel. Subaru: “A daydream... 'd be, way too convenient. But, that was...” just what, exactly?

Unwillingly made to witness the scene, Subaru thinks back on just what situation he's been put in. First of all and unmistakably, that had been A SCENE FROM AFTER SUBARU DIED.

Emilia's shrieks at seeing a dead Subaru, Wilhelm and Felis' futile devotion—and the nightmarish clashing of powers at the end.

The scars the first half butchered into his mind, and the apprehensions the second half spawned in his heart, quake his soul with their incomprehensibility

and uncontrollability.

Subaru: “Ugh, bhh—”

The second he remembers it, a hideous, wrenching pain in his gut leads him to bend over, the contents of his stomach splattering to the floor.

That said, he had not even really eaten dinner. All that comes out is the small amount of tea he had drunken about an hour ago, and yellowy stomach acid.

He forces his stomach to constrict as he repeats and repeats this vomiting, pretending that he's answered to his body's demands.

Puking and puking and puking and more, Subaru realises that he has a guess as to what the variation in his situation is, and what the cause may be.

If he had not been summoned to Echidna's dream castle, then the number of places he would be called while forfeiting consciousness would amount to one.

Subaru: “No way, the TRIAL? Not the past, the second one!?” Realising this possibility, Subaru is stupefied.

Subaru had overcome the first TRIAL several days ago now. But that statement only applied to his soul, and for his body the TRIAL had occurred only a few hours prior. Meaning, he should not be meeting the requirements to proceed to the next stage.

If the TRIAL had begun regardless, then the only thing to call it was 'irregular'. And most importantly, according to Echidna—

Subaru: “This TRIAL's not as painful as the one to face your past, is what she said, but...”

—Hypothetically, presuming the scene Subaru saw was part of the TRIAL, then even discounting its superficiality, he felt it an unfolding of the worst.

That scene was, for Subaru, what came after Hell.

Subaru had witnessed Hell numerous times. He was aware of that.

And if it were for the sake of obtaining the optimum future, Subaru had prepared himself to see Hell many times again.

—But, preparation to go even deeper than Hell, to learn of an even worse realm?

<Witness the uncomeatable present.> Subaru: “—Wha!?”

Faced with a terrifying experience and lost on whether to stay or retreat, a whisper abruptly skims across Subaru's ear.

Startled and body made to tense—exactly in that instant, the loss of consciousness comes to visit him.

Falling to his knees and unable to support himself, Subaru again collapses shoulder-first to the floor. He frantically raises his head in an attempt to keep conscious, but neither his eyelids nor neck manage to counter the invisible force as he is promptly dragged into the Abyssal depths.

—The TRIAL, the deepest pit of Hell, was again welcoming Subaru.

Subaru: <—>

When he opens his eyes, Subaru finds himself in a grassland, at the scene where Julius' sword had sliced open his throat—and again he is forced to witness his sins.

Chapter 71: Ending List

From the shallow, sharp sword-cut on his skin, Subaru's life slowly spills.

The fresh, gushing blood muddies the green grassland, while in front of the violet-haired man, Subaru's body goes into reflexive convulsions.

Eyes peeled open wide, foam froths from his lips as he retches incredible loads of blood. The intensity of the bleeding gradually softens, and with a noise of escaping air—

Subaru: <—>

—Subaru clearly understands that his past self has died.

It wasn't that his conscious self and past self shared the same senses. But regardless, the vivid sensation of his rended neck echoes without end, even for the consciousness-only Subaru—for the soul-only Subaru.

Julius: “Emilia-sama, I ask you wipe his... wipe Subaru's face clean.” Emilia: “—”

Julius: “He would desire it not be I, but you. At very least, by your hands.”

Wiping clean his bloodied knightblade and settling it into its scabbard, Julius addresses the stupefied Emilia.

At the feet of the fallen, face-up Subaru, the silver-haired girl falls hard to her knees. Her amethyst eyes lack emotion as they refuse to accept reality, and she goes without wiping away the teartracks wetting her cheeks as they glisten under the light.

Seeing this Emilia, a sharp pain gouges yet once again into Subaru's non-existent chest. Emilia's grieving expression takes the punishment he had avoided witnessing, makes it bare its fangs, and scours away at the thoughtless methods he had been using thus far.

Emilia: “Suhba... rhu.”

Her hand slowly creeps to reach for Subaru's bloody face and its spew, her palm softly wiping his dirtied visage. Barehanded, but heedless of the filth, Emilia determines to make Subaru's agony-bent face into something visible. Once she finishes wiping off the blood,

Emilia: “Why? How come Subaru, how come you, this...”

Emilia asks an empty question to someone who will never respond.

Neither his ears to listen, nor his mouth to answer, nor his anything at all are functioning. The dead Subaru would not entertain a single word of Emilia's ever again.

Subaru: <—>

As he looks down at the scene, Subaru recalls what the context for this was.

—This was after his second fight with Betelgeux where, unable to break through his possession, Subaru's body was destroyed alongside the madman.

Felis' magic had disrupted the circulation of his internal mana, and with the strain it put on his organs and capillaries, his death could certainly not be called

pretty. Blistery rashes blemish his visible skin, and the destruction of the blood vessels in his dimly-open eyes have dyed his whites red.

The nosebleed had been enough to coat the lower portion of his face. If Julius hadn't executed him, his death would have been even grislier.

But cleaning his dead face does nothing to save the hearts of those remaining. Especially those who had made it through the fight with the White Whale, and pledged a triumphant return to the Capital following the Sloth battle's end—the dejection and regret on their all faces wrenches the heart.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono... I sincerely beg, for your forgiveness...” Fallen to his knees, Wilhelm bows his head to the dead Subaru.

Slayer of all the cultists subordinate to Betelgeux, Wilhelm hangs his head at the battle's outcome, his expression one of tasting something keenly acrid. Equally are the elderly knights of the subjugation squad, some grieving like Wilhelm, others striking out at the ground. Some are even so incredibly emotional that tears spill from their eyes.

Seeing his own death be so mourned silences Subaru.

Compared to being shown the post-death events he had attempted not to realise, this impacted Subaru's heart with a pressure potentially even more overwhelming.

Emilia: “How come... even though this happened to you, for me, Subaru, you... why did you?” Setting her hand on the mute Subaru's cheek, Emilia continues in her fruitless calls.

Seeing her grief, Subaru belatedly realises.

In this universe, Subaru hasn't answered Emilia's question.

Subaru had not given his sincere answer to the query she posited at the Capital: WHY ARE YOU HELPING ME?

And so Emilia does not understand the reason for Subaru's utter devotion.

—While definitively different from the scene he had been shown before, this was nevertheless still the consequence of the irreparable sin Subaru had committed.

Julius: “Perennial tormentors of the world, the Witch Cult—whose vanguard of one, Sloth, has been slain. This constitutes for the world an incredible boon. —However.”

Looking down at Subaru's corpse, Julius raps his fingers against the hilt of his sheathed sword. Over and over, gaps gradually coming to the repeating rhythm.

Julius: “That does not mean I can accept every sacrifice made to achieve this. —I had wished to speak more with you, Natsuki Subaru.”

With that pained mutter, Julius averts his gaze from Subaru's dead face. The Knight looks to the sky, his eyes harbouring gloom.

Julius: “I had wished to call you a friend.”

Julius' weak and murmuring voice is the end to the grassland.

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Again the scene blacks out, and Subaru reawakens with a jolt. Subaru: “—Dggh, hwa! ...ah, aaaha, aaa!?”

He writhes about, to find himself atop a cold, hard floor.

With the mossy stench assaulting his nostrils, the tumbling Subaru focuses entirely on engaging in these pointless actions, attempting to flee from the emotions threatening to whip up a storm in his interior.

What's happening? Is not a thought he reaches.

He tumbles, tumbles, his otoliths in pain, torturing his lungs as he wheezes shallow breaths, his consciousness wishing to reduce its allotment spent thinking by even a little, even a hair, to hopefully sink into unconsciousness.

Subaru: “—ugh, guh!”

But even though he attempts to distract himself with these humanity-degrading practices, the moment he crashes into a wall and bounces away, he finds his strategy at a standstill.

Pain from his stricken back, and blood oozing from his grazed forehead. He takes ragged breath after ragged breath with his face still pressed to the floor, tears having mysteriously welled up at the corners of his eyes.

—Pathetic. Stupid. Hopeless.

Just how many times, to what extent, would weakness continue to overwhelm Natsuki Subaru? No matter what the circumstances, no matter what the suffering, an unshakeable and unbreakable heart of iron—just what did he need to do to acquire it?

So weak, so brittle, and so even until now, Subaru had—

Subaru: “Pretended not to notice, averted my eyes, and the payback... is this..?” It wasn't that he had never thought of it it.

In a corner of Subaru's awareness, not only once, but many times had the possibility come to mind.

That the thought never exceeded just a corner was because unconsciously, he had been refusing to investigate the truth, and refusing to consider it.

The existence of universes after Subaru dies—should Subaru think their presence potentially be fact, his way of fighting crumbles beneath his feet.

Everything he had thought to save had deserted Natsuki Subaru.

Or no, the one doing the deserting was Natsuki Subaru. By abhorrently and selfishly welcoming

DEATH, Subaru had deserted multiple universes to escape into new ones.

The worlds left behind by Natsuki Subaru's thoughtless decisions, should they perhaps still exist, would be exactly the scenes Subaru was being shown now.

Subaru: “—You're, kidding me.”

His consciousness once again begins growing distant.

Unlike sleepiness, this was a sudden whitening of his consciousness to sequester it from reality.

<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

At his ear, again an unidentifiable voice whispers.

Whose voice was that, desperately wonders his fading consciousness—and he notices.

—That was, without any doubt, his very own voice.

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Before the corpse and its pulverised skull, a girl has fallen to her knees.

Fallen from high up, hit with an impact beyond what a fleshy human body could endure, insides of its black-haired head splayed about the ground, a flower of death bloomed in crimson.

Subaru: <—>

This sensation of his consciousness switching states no longer surprises Subaru.

After the forced conversion in his consciousness, he had figured this phenomenon would happen. What he hadn't figured was what scene exactly would be presented to his sobered mind, but—

???: “Speaking nonsense to the very end of the end... now, nothing's...”

Fallen to his death, Subaru lies sprawled against the earth. Standing beside him as she spits her statement is a pink-haired girl—Ram.

Her usual impeccable grooming is in disarray, the snagged rips and tears in her outfit particularly outstanding. While she consciously attempts to keep her expression blank, some complex emotion and rage still slip though.

An expression lamenting Subaru's death—or actually rather, fury at this outcome. Ram rigorously scratches at her head, then turning back.

Ram: “And was this all conforming to your designs, Beatrice-sama? That you

blocked my advance was your...”

Beatrice: “—”

Ram's expression stiffens as she goes to reproach Beatrice, her words cutting off.

There before Subaru's corpse, Ram's cerise eyes see Beatrice fallen to her knees. Heedless of the dirtiness to her dress, she sits bare on the ground—witnessing Beatrice's state, unrest jolts Ram's eyes.

Ram: “Beatrice-sama...”

Beatrice: “—Why?”

She murmurs.

Paying no mind even to Ram's existence, Beatrice wholeheartedly gazes at the dead Subaru. That from her blue eyes tears are drawing their tracks, even Subaru can see.

—Beatrice was crying. At Subaru's DEATH.

That truth plunged a blade called guilt deep into Subaru's heart.

Feeling his non-existent eyes grow hot at the heart-gouging pain, Subaru wishes to immediately dash over to that small, little girl, speak something, anything to her.

The legs, the arms, the mouth, the anything to achieve this, do not exist for him. Beatrice: “I, at least knew that... you aren't, they... but...”

Her expression vanished, Beatrice mutters almost incoherently as the teardrops continue to fall. Ram seems to have abandoned making any further remarks to Beatrice about her heartbreaking visage. She sighs. At Subaru's corpse and the incredible angle of his bent neck, she directs her scornful gaze.

Ram: “Love, wonderful. —Truly, there's nothing to salvage.”

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<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

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A misty white chill—cold enough to almost freeze the very air—dominates the world.

The frozen forest trees break apart with every gust of the wind, unable to maintain their existence in this mana-wrung environment as they return to dust.

The trees, the towns, the creatures, the world, all turn to thousands of crystalline white particles in the gale, white demise slowly encroaching on the realm.

Subaru: <—>

This time, what Subaru's witnessing is the end of the world.

Just like how his consciousness had turned to white, the world attempts to meet a frigid and merciful end.

However,

???: “—So, you did come.”

A low voice quakes the air as it bellows, its tone one of agreement.

An incredible tremor rocks the earth as the behemoth's downward fall entirely transforms the landscape. Trees snap and topple, the felled things crumbling into snowflakes, the successive shocks morphing the forest into a flatland.

What brought about the destruction of this flattened, frozen woodland was a colossal four-legged beast, coated in grey fur and apparently feline.

Half of the beast's overflowing fangs break, white puffs of air escaping the gaps between the swordlike teeth. With its golden eyes blazing and still collapsed on its side, it turns itself to face frontward.

And, trembling nearly convulsively,

Beast: “Frustrating... I knew this would happen, but still there's nothing I can change about it.”

???: “—I've more or less grasped the situation. And so, I find this truly a regret.”

The beast speaks not to winge about its loss, but in intelligent acceptance of

the truth. It is a shockingly clear, beautiful voice which responds.

Even amid the end of the world, this voice suggests not a single detriment to its owner's vitality or health. Standing tall and standing straight, red hair tousled in the white wind, is a blue-eyed young man.

Man: “Neither Emilia-sama nor Subaru would be anywhere anymore?”

Beast: “Lia is sleeping, eternally. Existing in a world without her carries no value at all. I who failed to protect her, and that man, share the same sin.”

Man: “You are attempting to destroy the world because of this?” Beast: “I knew I'd be obstructed. But, doing this is what I pledge.”

Unsheathed from its engraved dragon-talon scabbard, the glinting steel points at the snout of the beast—at Puck in his true form—as the sword-wielding SWORD SAINT Reinhardt silently shakes his head.

His blue eyes house deep sorrow, and sympathy.

Reinhardt: “I understand your rue. I feel the same thing. But, that does not mean you may use those feelings to lash out at those around you. Your actions, and the outcome of your pledge, will bring chaos to the world. —I am unable to ever allow that.”

Puck: “Because it's unjust?”

Reinhardt: “Yes, because it is unjust. —I am a model of what is just. Sword to rectify error. Consequently, here I shall need to slay you. Great Spirit.”

Nevermind the overwhelming disparity in mass, anyone could tell who had the greater combat strength here.

True-form Puck, without managing to discompose Reinhardt's unruffled expression at all, was at death's door. Should the point of the entrenched sword draw a single arc of silver, then by that alone would Reinhardt's blade slice even a spirit in twain.

The ferocity of his surging swordcery communicated that fact clearly to the surroundings. Puck: “—Kh.”

And so, that sound leads Reinhardt to furrow his brows.

Even Subaru's consciousness has something arise in his scant emotions coloured with the hue of a question mark.

It's hard to judge just what that short, choppy sound was—as he could not believe that it was what he plainly heard.

Puck: “Kh, kuku... Haha, huhahaha!” Reinhardt: “—Is there something funny?”

Throat shaking, and on the border of death, Puck's face twists as he bursts into laughter.

Not comprehending Puck's motives here, Reinhardt asks his question. But, as if finding Reinhardt's query even more humorous,

Puck: “Is something funny? Incredibly funny, of course it's funny. Reinhardt, you... nah, I mean you don't know anything.”⁵ Reinhardt says nothing.

Puck: “I just remembered. How things're supposed to be. It's super late understanding. And that I know this, and you still don't, is so amazingly funny I can't stop.”

That statement, including the fact the volume of his voice is different from when in his usual form, is incredibly unlike Puck.

This was for Subaru, who had quite a few memories of interacting with the cat-shaped spirit, the first time he had ever seen him speaking to someone with such spite.

2 Puck's form of addressing Reinhardt changes from 'kimi' to 'omae' (assume all Puck's 'you's from this point on are 'omae').

This was different to when Emilia had been killed, and he aimed his loathing at Subaru and Betelgeux. Back then, Puck should've still been Puck.

But right now, as he ridicules Reinhardt, he differs from anything Subaru's ever seen from Puck before, as if he were something entirely different—.

Reinhardt: “...I will be safeguarding against any further casualties now. If you're to resent, resent me.”

Puck: “No resenting here, Reinhardt. You're a hero. Heroes have their roles, their deeds, that only heroes can do. With you conforming to that, I'm resenting and faulting nothing.”

Reinhardt: “—”

Puck: “You're a hero, Reinhardt. —A hero is all you can ever be.”

At the end of the end, and accordingly so, this statement is the one spoken with the most spite.

Hearing it through, Reinhardt swings up his sword, and with one flash of

swordcery—following the edge of the glinting sword out bursts an incredible wave of energy.

It cleaves through the sky, drills through the air, shatters the ground, roils the ambient mana, rending everything which was in the blade's path in two—the light settles, and the sight before Subaru's consciousness slips.

Subaru: <—>

That world, covered in its frigid chill—after the torrential sword-slash settles, it rebirths.

The slippage in the world is rectified, the once-roiled mana forms a ring as it recirculates through the world, the once-shattered earth blooms with flowers, the once-pierced air abounds with gaiety, and down from the once-cleaved sky there shines sunlight.

Simultaneously bringing the end and rebirth of the world, the Sword Saint's strike.

The colossal beast stricken with the attack remains as not even a trace, completely extinguished from the universe.

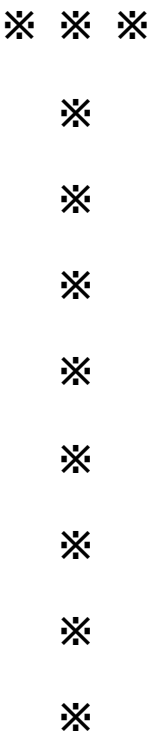
Assuredly present until just a few seconds ago, the behemoth is gone, and no hint of the destruction it caused remains.

Subaru: <—>

Reinhardt sheaths his knightblade in its scabbard.

Wind caressing his red hair as he squints up at the sunlight, Reinhardt slips a sigh so faint as to be inaudible.

Reinhardt: “—Felt-sama will be surely be sad.” He murmurs, eyes closed.



<Witness the uncomeatable present.>



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Intermission: Tea Party

“Parallel universes, is one school of thought. That, separate from the universe you're living in now, different universes which had followed along a similar track exist.”

The voice speaks, its intonation uninflected as utterly possible.

Alongside the lecture-scented statement, fingertips rap against the table in pleasant, even rhythm.

“This sounds—hoo—as though it's—haa—going to get complicated.”

“The idea's not that complex. You can consider these parallel universes as things being infinitely generated by just one difference in choice. For example, say there's a crossroads on the way to your home. At this crossroads, where either path ultimately leads to your house, there's a you who went right and a you who went left—these two approaches can already be called extremely small-scale parallel universes.”

“What. Then you're saying there's so many universes out there you can't even count them. This's just stupid.”

At the reply to the exhausted voice, a stubborn voice joins in with its hasty response. The lecturer smiles wryly, pointing their finger at the rash speaker.

“It isn't anything so ridiculous. While yes, the breadth of that last example may've been too narrow and not communicated the scope of the difference very well... you can assuredly apply this concept to larger situations, too.”

“Bigger situations... like?”

“Such as, right. —If you'd been capable of abandoning the isolated elves on that suicide mission in the Borloid Plains, I wonder just what would've happened?”

“—”

“...Hrm. My predictions had it that you'd be infuriated here.”

“It's simple why I'm not angry. No matter if that scene repeats tens, hundreds, thousands of times, I would always absolutely dive my fists right in. —These

parallel universes you're talking about wouldn't happen!"

With that intense assertion, the stubborn voice's owner swings up their legs as they throw their feet down on the table, taking a reclining posture. The lecturer suppresses a laugh. Seeing their smile, the stubborn one's pretty eyebrows pitch sharply down.

"What's so funny!?"

"No, I mean that was very manly of you, but your pants are showing, Minerva."

Minerva: "Auh, nnuh! What, stupid! I can't even believe this! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! You're so

stupid! Just stupid! Stupid! You are so stupid! You're stupid and, um, stupid!"

While yelling curses which reveal the poverty of her vocabulary, the blonde girl—the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva—brings her feet off the table in tears, shoving her hands down to the crotch region of her short skirt as she closes her legs.

She looks directly up and ahead with rage in her eyes—glaring at the white-haired witch. But,

Sekhmet: "Haa—Leaving aside who's correct in this spat and—huh—getting to the pants—huh— that was just sordid Minerva backfiring on herself—huh— Your resenting others for it is disgraceful."

Minerva: “Sordid, now you're who I don't wanna be hearing that from, Sekhmet. Like you ever wear anything else... how long have you gone without changing out of that robe?”

Minerva's harsh gaze turns to the side of the table—aimed at the WITCH OF SLOTH Sekhmet, her face buried in her long, magenta hair.

Sekhmet shifts her neck, looking at Minvera from a gap in the ocean of hair.

Sekhmet: “You just put it on over your head—huu—so this outfit is the easiest and—haa—Typhon wipes down my body—huu—so it's not as though I'm really dirty—haa.”

Minerva: “You go nitpicking about how others look after their appearance, and then about yourself you're just so... augh, aughhh, aughhhh, what do you want!? I'm to blame here? It's all my fault?

You want me to punch you all better!?”

Sekhmet goes without answering the riled Minerva, instead looking away.

A vein bulges on Minvera's forehead in response to Sekhmet's lack of energy to speak, but being fully accustomed to Minerva's rages, Sekhmet entirely abandons any intention to care.

Taking over for the spent Witch of Sloth, the first witch to speak with Minerva—the WITCH OF GREED Echidna—claps their hands.

Echidna: “I do understand your anger, and that said I also find it nice. Now, I'm sorta thinking to continue what we were talking about before.”⁶

Minerva: “Hnmpf. You were the one bringing up this stuff about parallel universes so you'd have a reason to get me mad, Echidna. I am so angry. I'm

enraged. I'm furious.”

Echidna: “Yes yes. Now, about the parallel universes. If that last example didn't work... right. What do you think would've happened if Flügel hadn't been able to form a covenant with Volcanica?”

Finger to her lip as she smiles mischievously, Echidna asks this question of Minerva. Minerva swallows her breath, her blue eyes narrowing.

Minerva: “If Volcanica and Flügel had no covenant, with only Reid to stop her it wouldn't be enough... the world would've been swallowed.”

Echidna: “Swallowed, and then who knows what. I suppose only a single person, the WITCH OF ENVY, would remain then. Potentially, even a world where that did happen exists out there as a parallel universe. And if it does, don't you just find that incredibly interesting?”

3 Throughout this entire chapter, Echidna uses the pronoun 'watashi' instead of her usual 'boku'.

Minerva: “Your eyes get so gross when you're talking about her, Echidna. — I'm really not that mad at her. You're not gonna be getting me sharing that wrath with you.”

Echidna: “That is just another possible answer. —Your wrath is truly pleasant. That's why you were the witch most worthy of being loved.”

Says Echidna in past tense. Minerva gives a small snort as she averts her gaze and crosses her arms, emphasizing her abundant chest.

Minerva: “I'm not looking to be loved. What I want is for war to disappear from this world, for my fists to exterminate the wails of suffering and sadness and crying and pain. I don't need any path set for me except that. My rage, my wrath, my healing fists—are my everything.”

States Minerva clearly, with not a speck of doubt.

Conviction with no indecision, hesitation, worry, trouble, and not any trace of anything to lead her astray.

Indeed this is WRATH—directed at the world, an inexhaustible fury which formed this girl from the roots up.

???: “Well, you could say that, if you want I guess. That you get so ha-ppy, when peo-ple praise you, that you just start grinning so big, is your cute point, Ner-Ner.”

A voice cuts in from opposite Sekhmet, that is to say from Minerva's left.

Daphne: “Ner-Ner, your scale of not, be-ing hon-est, is in itself witch-tier. That's something about you I like so much, I just want to eat it.”

Minerva: “Shut up, Daphne. You were sleeping until now, why'd you have to suddenly wake up.”

Daphne: “But I've been a-wake, e-ver since, you got noisy and flashed your undies. You go around, wearing a t-i-n-y skirt, which shows them off if you parade a-bout a li-ttle, and you still have kuh-yoo-tee undies, oh you Ner-Ner.”

Minerva: “Y-you're one to talk! You're younger, and yours are nearly obscene! The hell are those, they aren't underwear, it's a string! Stupid! You stupid!

You're so stupid! You really are, just, so hopeless and stupid! Stupid! Stupidstupid!”

Face pure red and eyes full of tears, Minerva wails. Happily paying no mind to this is the WITCH OF GLUTTONY Daphne.

She rests immobile in her full-body restraints, her eyes covered by crisscrossing blindfolds, her body settled inside a black coffin. With this thing casually hanging out at the table, to an outsider this tea party would certainly look surreal.

Run out of insults to sling (or really, she just said 'stupid' over and over, but), Minerva plumps back down in her seat, burying her face in her hands as she slumps forward over the table.

Minerva: “Just what, just what, just what!? It's like, am I to blame here? It's not that I'm doing it to get compliments, but of course you're going to be happy if people compliment you. What's so bad about thinking 'glad I did that' when someone tells you 'thank you'? Am I in the wrong? Is this my fault? I'm healing everybody but I want healing too...”

Echidna: “That you can't explode into a violent fit of self-neglect from that, I really think to be part of your charm. —Now.”

Leaving aside Minerva, who descends into a sea of soliloquy as she checks out of the conversation, Echidna directs her gaze to Daphne. Blindfolded Daphne shouldn't be able to perceive this, but she nonetheless gives a few cute little sniffs.

Daphne: “Idna-Idna, what do you want, from looking at me? I'm not like Ner-

Ner and Met-Met, I can't en-dure through, a con-ver-sa-tion for you. A-ct-u-a-lly... haa, haa... my calories are nearly burned out already.”

Echidna: “I already learned well enough before death that there is nothing more foolish than seeking cooperativeness from a witch, but... when the conversation is proceeding this poorly, it just makes me want to brag about you all.”

Says Echidna, as she raps the fingers of her right hand off the table.

Instantly, a steaming teacup and a plate of cookies appears before Daphne, who abruptly gets very excited.

Echidna: “Naturally, I have no intention to make you wait, so if you would like to e...” Daphne: “Snarfblarfomnomnomchewchewchewblahargle.”

Echidna: “Didn't bear mentioning. If you could, I would kind of appreciate you practice your table manners here, but.”

Echidna shrugs, the sight before her being Daphne—with her entire upper-body riding the table as she eats. —For Daphne, meals are quite literally full-bodied.

Her mouth makes eating noises, but in actuality the tea and cookies aren't disappearing down her gullet, rather getting sucked inside directly through her skin. The offered tea, cookies, and teacup all disappear inside Daphne, immediately becoming nourishment for GLUTTONY.

Daphne: “Ahh, so yu-mmy, so ta-sty. ...Ah, I'm sorry. I got a little too en-thu-si-as-tic and gobbled the table.”

Echidna: “It's nothing to worry about. ...Isn't what I could go so far as to say,

but from the instant I invited you I was more or less resigned this would happen. There's nothing I'd desire more from you than to be a little more prudent with yourself.”

Daphne: “Idna-Idna, do you go around, or-der-ing, birds not to fly, or fish not to swim?” Echidna sighs. Daphne rocks her body back upright.

Daphne: “Alrighty,”

Daphne: “My stomach's got, food in it, so I'll have a conversation with you now Idna-Idna. —You were talking about parallel universes, or so-m-e-thi-n-g?”

Echidna: “That's right. Daphne, what do you think about it?”

Daphne: “I don't really think anything? Things went like this because of this, or what would things be, if things happened here, thinking about that stuff, does-n't fill my stomach. Ah, but if I think of a split like, should I have red meat for dinner, or have fish, then maybe it's not re-a-lly a dumb idea.”

Echidna: “I've got no complaints on comprehension level when it's you, Daphne, but... genuinely, it's not pulling your interest enough for a discussion. That's another thing I had expected, though.”

Daphne possesses a very chill personality out of the witches, and she's easy to interact with. The problem is that her existence in itself is a detriment to all living creatures, and that her ferocious constitution is hopelessly not suited for coexistence with others.

Sekhmet: “So ultimately, then. Haa. No matter what you speculate about parallel universes—hoo— it's a thing where thinking about it is—haa—entirely pointless.”

Cutting in to this sad struggling conversation is the Witch of Sloth, her body still slumped on the damaged table. Balled up in her own long hair, she says to the onlooking Echidna and onsmelling Daphne,

Sekhmet: “Even supposing you accept this school—haa—of thought and those split worlds as existing, you can't know or experience them in actuality—hoo—Then, that untouchable bubble so called their potentiality of existing—haa—bursts and dissipates the moment that you touch it.”

Echidna: “Indeed, if you consider from the realistic perspective that's likely the case. Even if you can consciously recognize the existence of parallel universes, you cannot actually observe them. Parallel, is an apt term for it. Never intermingling, running on two divided lines—that would be an alternate universe deemable as a parallel universe.”

Minerva: “—But that's not what the second TRIAL is, then.”

Says Minerva, cutting in with her lovable face dyed crimson in rage.

Minerva: “If Echidna's going out of the way to talk about it, then this had to be going somewhere mean. Had to. I'm spot-on right. You're thinking I just prodded you somewhere where it hurts. But if you didn't want people probing around at you, then you could've just not done something so stupid as hiding your hurt!”

Echidna: “I didn't say anything, and having you get indignant on me is kind of a problem... but well, not that I can refute you. After all, the second TRIAL indeed uses that kind of mechanism.”

Minerva punches an indentation into the table as Echidna lightly raises her hand, a black-bound book appearing in her fingers.

This was Echidna's forbidden text which chronicled the knowledge of every PAST, FUTURE, and PRESENT in the world—that is, the MEMORIES OF THE WORLD.

Should the Thirst For Knowledge Incarnate Echidna ever feel to, she could learn any and every tidbit of information, knowledge, and history in this world. That said, due to issues of Echidna's personality, she harboured disgust for utilizing the tome's power.

Echidna: “The second TRIAL reads the deepest thoughts of the challenger, seeking juncture points in the path they have walked—or otherwise, moments classifiable as REGRETS—and the Memories of the World reconstructs an IMPOSSIBLE PRESENT resultant from a difference in choice at those crossroads. Compared to the first TRIAL which makes the challenger face symbols of their past mistakes, and the third TRIAL waiting ahead, this one is consequently rather easy to defeat.”

Minerva: “Easy to defeat, which means?”

Echidna: “Essentially it's the same case as for Daphne, a problem of clear rationalization. Sekhmet mentioned this already—but ultimately, parallel universes are untouchable, divided lines. There may be regret, there may be rue for it, but the lines remain beyond our reach.”

Minerva: “What's putting people so close to these unreachable lines is your TRIAL!”

Says an annoyed Minerva. Echidna shrugs, stroking her white hair as she speaks to calm the now-standing Minerva.

Echidna: “Defeating the second TRIAL is relatively easy for the ordinary person. Unlike the first TRIAL where you must overcome a past event which actually happened, the second TRIAL just means touching a something WHICH COULD HAVE HAPPENED. You're at liberty to interact with it while either rejecting or accepting the parallel world, but... all you really need to do is capably affirm your present, actual world.”

Minerva: “Actual, world...”

Echidna: “And so we return to the topic of problems of rationalization. And this rationalization is a simple one where Sekhmet or Daphne, or maybe even you could do it. —If you're capable of that, you can overcome the TRIAL.”

Minerva gives a reluctant, begrudging nod.

Indeed, going off Echidna's statements alone, the content of this TRIAL would not seem anything so harsh.

Should it be any of the witches here—or for argument not even one of the witches, but somebody with an unshakable grasp of themselves—defeating the TRIAL would be easy.

Daphne: “But then why, is Su-ba-ruun, having such a hard time with it? Subaruun didn't re-a-ll-y seem without self i-den-ti-ty.”

Echidna: “—So, his case.”

Daphne for some reason makes little chewy motions as she reminisces on Subaru. Ignoring this, Echidna closes her eyes as she considers only Daphne's words.

Echidna: “The second TRIAL is observation of parallel worlds. In a sense, it's the deed of observing what would come after your past regrets. And like we discussed before, you can easily preform a rejection or an affirmation of it. — Because you can explain it away by noting that events did not actually travel along that path.”

Echidna: “However,”

Echidna: “In his case alone, this doesn't apply. Even I hadn't predicted that the second TRIAL would sting him this much. —Truly, beyond my prediction.”

Daphne: “Sniff sniff... Idna-Idna, you smell like you're smi-l-ing, so happ-i-ly.”

Minerva: “I bet she's just happy 'cause she didn't predict it. She's nasty, weird... there's no helping her.”

Echidna: “Birds of a feather. Being that you are my friends, you're not exempt from that either.”

Daphne snickers, Minerva is in an angry huff. When they start hearing sleeper's breathing from Sekhmet's direction, and while watching the other witches' respective reactions, Echidna leans back in her chair. And,

???: "'Chidna~—Typhon's hungry too."

Running down from the meadow up to the table on the hill is a girl, bursting in as she calls to Echidna.

Short green hair and tan skin, her white teeth dazzling as she smiles. It's the WITCH OF PRIDE Typhon. She had gone without getting involved in the tricky conversation, killing her time out in the meadow. Echidna smiles at her.

Echidna: "Sorry for boring you. Typhon, do you want some tea... or perhaps something sweet'd be better. You can eat sweets normally, right?"

Typhon: "Alls good. Running a lot spent my strength—so—drink then eat then rest."

Says Typhon with incredible energy as she pulls out an empty chair to sit beside Sekhmet. With one hand playing around with Sekhmet's hair, Typhon messily gobbles up the tea and sweets Echidna finger-snaps into existence.

For anyone ignorant of Typhon's nature, it would be charming scene. Echidna: "You must be tired too, from looking after Typhon?"

???: "Th... that's, n-not true... though? T-Typhon's a, good girl... and, her power... d-doesn't... no, um, it doesn't, get through... so, y-yeah? I-It's all, okay. I'm, just dandy."

Standing beside Echidna, arriving at the tea party after Typhon, this character gives a faltering reply as a weak smile rises on their face.

With her pink hair reaching down to her hips, this girl gives a shockingly ephemeral vibe. While her face lacks any outstanding or special features, for some reason it naturally attracts the eye.

More than anything, the way that her actions and expressions are somehow reminiscent of a small animal's tugs at the heartstrings horrifically.

Echidna: "Have a seat, Camilla. —My calling you was intentional, after all."

Camilla: "I-is, is something... s-star, starting... now? It wo... won't be, s-sc-scary?"

Echidna: "There will be nothing scary or painful. —I'd merely like your help to get the pieces moving."

Seating herself beside Echidna as offered, Camilla—the WITCH OF LUST—timidly looks at the other witch. Echidna gives Camilla a smile as she easily flicks out her arms.

Echidna: "—Using your love, how about you try saving a lost little lamb?" Says Echidna to the trembling witch, offering to her her outstretched arms—

Chapter 72: Bad End 1, 5, 11

—Say his heart breaks countless times, would he be forgiven?

???: “And it's already over... this job certainly lacked in anything worthwhile.”

Inside a dark warehouse, gazing down at the three corpses submerged in an ocean of blood, a black-robed beauty tilts her head.

With her bizarre skill she existed in this blood-suffused place without a single drop of the stuff on her, and with her abnormal mentality she observes the slaughter without a single change to her complexion.

Unmistakably, this woman was a monster garbed in human skin.

Her footsteps crossing this floor soaked with blood, the monster looks interestedly at the corpses. A giant old man with his arm sliced off at the shoulder, and incredible bloodflow spilling from his neck. A black-haired boy with a perfect line shredded across his stomach, having died writhing about the floor with his innards spilling out.

—And, sliced in two from her left shoulder to her right hip, a silver girl.

—How many times had he rebelled, voicing his desire not to witness this scene?

Monster: “It's the worst of outcomes for a commission... although, I wonder what all this was.”

Putting a finger to her red lips, the monster mutters in a horrifically out-of-place and casual tone. In the hand other than the one at her lips there wavers a

sinister, bloody, crooked blade—a kukri.

Leisurely letting sway the weapon that stole three—no, four—lives in this loot house, the monster called Elsa smiles resplendently.

Elsa: “—Oh my.”

Tilting her head, Elsa lightly takes a leap backwards.

Immediately, a blade of ice stabs up from the ground where Elsa had been standing. Frozen stalagmites spear out in sequence as they pursue Elsa's path, these gnashing fangs, pressing in to bite.

Elsa: “Goodness...”

???: “How dare you.”

In the space before Elsa as he evades the iceblades, there concentrates a gathering of dim light, a small spirit forming itself a shape.

The floating cat spirit—Puck—bears an acerbic expression, his rather androgynous voice shaking in rage.

Puck: “You're going to regret taking Lia's life.”

Elsa: “Right, that girl... she was a spiritualist. Truly excellent. I've never opened up a spirit's stomach before. —Though.”

Faced with a battle-ready Puck and his floating ice lances, Elsa smiles

indulgently at the portents of battle. But, before she takes fighting posture, she closes one eye.

Elsa: “Why didn't you show up before she died? Spiritualists come with the practitioner and the spirit in one grouping—if I can't enjoy the full experience, it's a detriment.”

Puck: “Shut your prattle, you damned murderer. —If I just weren't bound by the contract, I...” Shaking his head, Puck's expression twists in vexation.

He bares his fangs, pointing his little arm at Elsa.

Puck: “I have no intention to talk. I'm turning you to ice, giving Lia's soul its peace. After you're gone will be the country, the world, Dragon and Witch, everything.”

Elsa: “Ahh, so excellent—I'll be enjoying myself, now!”

Springing, Elsa crawls over the ceiling and walls like a spider. With her slender frame as the target, consecutive firings of ice spears bore into the loot house's walls, the atmosphere beginning to freeze, the air raising a shrill shriek.

Pure white covers the view, rendering everything invisible.

Toppled on the floor with fingers coincidentally intertwined, Subaru and Emilia's cadavers included

—everything invisible.

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—Say the world betrays him countless times, would he be rewarded?

Rem: “My actions were nothing more than a preventive defence against degeneration of the situation. By the time I had found him, Subaru-kun was already beyond any chance of rescue. —He would have desired to be put down immediately.”

Emilia: “And, so... that's what that, terrible end was, is what you're saying, Rem? Subaru is my benefactor, and there were going to be so many things for us to talk about... and you...”

He hears the quarrelling voices of two beloved girls. One voice beckons to Subaru adoration and grief.

One voice belongs to who, every time she is made to stand through adversary, Subaru wished for her to touch him sweetly, needily, imploringly.

The blue-haired girl and the silver-haired girl face each other, a turbulent atmosphere flowing through the room.

Setting is the mansion's living room, the two seated on either side of a table in a livewire situation. Roswaal: “Nooooooooow now, let's go without you getting carried away also, Emilia-sama. Why

doooooooooon't we start by prooooooooooperly listening to Rem's side aaaaaaas well?”

Emilia: “Roswaal... do you understand what's happened? Rem has... your servant has, led my benefactor, and also your guest Subaru, to... to his death.”

Roswaal: “I do quiiiiiiiiite understand. Which iiiiiiiis why... we must have a clear discussion on the topic. —For the sake of preventing any

misunderstandings in your mutual sentiments, aaaaas well.”

Roswaal narrows his yellow eye as he replies. The clown shoots a gaze to the Rem seated beside him, and perceiving the glance, Rem nods.

Rem: “There late last night in the eastern wing... on the floor housing Emilia-sama's room, was an intruder. The warning gems alerted me to this as I promptly headed for the scene, which is where I had discovered Subaru-kun loitering about.”

Ram: “Barusu was already under the curse's effects by then.”

Rem: “Yes, My Sister is exactly correct. Weakened, Subaru-kun was on the border of death. The curse's effects had sapped his vitality to the absolute limit, and having determined that to save him would be impossible...”

Emilia: “You beat him to death with your flail. —And brutally.” Ram: “Emilia-sama.”

Sitting beside her younger sister Rem, having held her hand, Ram's eyes as she looks at Emilia are harsh. But Emilia faces Ram's sharp gaze with strength.

Emilia: “The facts are the facts. ...Subaru's body, his torso and head were in awful condition. If you were just meaning to give him an execution, there had to have been a gentler way. So then, why?”

Rem: “That, would be...” Rem is stuck for words.

That she does not say anything further is because Rem's personality is not one for telling lies, and because Emilia's statement hit accurately on her motives.

Rem harboured intense distrust for Subaru back then.

After the second loop in the mansion loop series—where Rem had bludgeoned Subaru to death, failed to conceal the fact, and was resultingly having this conversation.

You could also say that Rem's hostility for a Subaru interacting familiarly with Ram had intensified, and she could not keep from actualizing her desire to murder.

—On that upper floor of the mansion, when she swung her flail at Subaru, just what had Rem been thinking?

Perhaps the whole affair was uncertain even to Rem.

Emilia: “—Your aim was off, or it was because you hesitated... those were the answers I wanted to hear.”

Rem: “—hk”

Emilia mutters sadly, her eyes closed. Rem's face jerks up.

It's unclear how well Emilia's words had perceived what the truth of matters were for Rem. And it would always, forever remain unclear.

Roswaal: “Emilia-sama, to where are you going?”

Emilia stands up, brushing at her skirt's hem. Roswaal's expression vanishes as he asks her his question.

Hearing it, Emilia pats her long, silver hair.

Emilia: “—I'm leaving. It was only for a short while, but thank you for having me. I know I'm incapable of participating in the Royal Selection without the backing of you all. But... I can't trust you any more.”

Roswaal: “Even should you not trust us, do you not believe a relationship of mutual utilization yet beneficial? Abdicating due to a tantrum cannot be called a wise decision.”

Emilia: “Tantrum...?”

Emilia's face stiffens in shock. Then she promptly walks over to Roswaal—

—No one could have stopped that peal of flesh on flesh.

Those white fingers of hers slapped Roswaal across his pallid cheek, hard.

Emilia falls out of breath with that one single strike against that reddened, swelling cheek. The slapped Roswaal doesn't do anything, but instead Ram's face pales as she moves to stand up and—

Roswaal: “Ram.”

Ram: “But, Roswaal-sama.”

Roswaal: “It's fine. You can stay seated. Emilia-sama, my apologies for Ram.”

Emilia: “This is what you're always like to me... but you're still saying nothing about Subaru...”

Biting her lip, Emilia glares at the calm Roswaal. A furious rage churns in her amethyst eyes, but Roswaal's composure remains completely unrattled.

Roswaal: “Leaving the mansion, and returning to the forest—would he have left you with some feeling?”

Emilia: “I was wrong for going along with your wheedling. Atonement... my penance can be done in lots of other ways. I was mistaken about it. And because I was, Subaru died.”

Emilia closes her eyes in response to Roswaal's question, announcing her reply in quiet voice. She gives a slight shake of the head.

Emilia: “I'm bringing his soul with me and placing it peacefully to rest in the forest. —For Subaru and for the rest, no matter how long it takes, I'm devoting my time to their repose. And now, the conversation is over.”

Having no intention to speak with them any further, Emilia takes distance from Roswaal. Her hair sways with her departure, Roswaal watching on with his heterochromatic eyes. Still seated in his chair, his arm reaches out for the retreating back—and falls.

Roswaal: “Should this veer from the writ, then here... woouooooould be where my track ends.” Ram: “Roswaal-sama...”

Whispers Roswaal powerlessly, Ram speaking with concern as she takes his hand. The clown glances at the girl gazing worriedly at him, a weak smile rising on his face.

Roswaal: “Ram, you would appear the winner of oooooooooour bet. Here is

where my purposes have likely hit an impasse... in short, the contract can be fulfilled.”

Ram: “...Yes. Yes, Roswaal-sama.”

With these two having their quiet exchange at the corner of her eye, Emilia proceeds toward Rem, who has stood up to open the door. Before passing her by, Emilia looks at Rem and her solemnly bowed head.

Emilia: “Lead me to where Subaru is.” Rem: “Emilia-sama, that would be...”

Emilia: “I know he's in awful condition. I'll put him back to normal so much as I can... and, take him with me to the forest.”

Her expression stiffening at seeing Emilia's horrifically sorrowful face, Rem looks down. In her expression is something like regret, as well something like anger.

She's surely conflicted on, why did it have to turn out like this?, he thought.

—Why did it have to turn out like that? Nobody could answer. Emilia: “I'm sorry, Subaru. —I couldn't even do anything.” Murmurs Emilia, at the close.

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—Say his foolishness strikes him countless times, would he be capable of understanding?

???: 9ス、9ス！ 9ス9ス9ス9ス、9ス！！

Out echoes the high, shrill cackle.

Chest swelled, mouth agape, drool dribbling from their lips as they hoot, the young redhead girl violently musses her hair.

With this woman's repellent behaviour, and more importantly with the mad gawking of her bloodshot eyes, she is clearly lacking in decent humanity.

Girl: “To love! Of love! By love! In love! To repay love! Is to what EVERYTHING AMOUNTS! Aaah! Oh Witch! Oh Witch And Well Beloved! Oh Site Of My Love's Harbour!”

Fallen to her knees with arms stretched to the sky, tears torrent from her eyes the girl extols love. In the environs of this crazed girl are many cadavers scattered in a sea of blood. Limbs plucked, necks gouged, corpses violated of their human dignity.

Among them is the corpse of a black-haired boy, who stuck himself through the throat with a sword.

Pools of blood drown the ground of Arlam Village, every member of the armed subjugation squad too lying prone, their lives extinguished in entirety.

The moment the surprise attack felled the squad's primary powerhouse, the Sword Demon, the trend was set.

What remains is a massacre brought by UNSEEN HANDS, death wails ringing out in turn as the last of the numbers meet their end.

Girl: “What ought my diligence! What ought my downing of the slothful be called, if not a deed OF LOVE! Aaah! The Fidelity Of My Love, The Fidelity Of My Creed, My Love Never To Waver!

Receive it! Accept it! I beg it be YOUR ENSCONCER!!”

This woman screaming loves, trailing tears, howling in a sea of blood—her flesh stolen and mind invaded by the fiend, Betelgeux Romanée-Conti.

The madman had caught Subaru's group in one fell swoop, and despite having

lost his cultists, he continues stridently shrieking love.

When—

???: “—Something's happened?”

Says a winded girl, running down from the path continuing out from the village.

She annoyedly gets the silver hair sticking to her forehead out of the way, her amethyst eyes looking over the slaughter. —Emilia's eyes shoot open at the villagers drowned in an ocean of blood, and she notices—

Emilia: “Suhba, rhu?”

—That collapsed in the middle of the carnage is a boy she knows of well.

Just what was the emotion which flicked through Emilia's mind in that instant? The feelings churning in her wide-open eyes are too complex, that not anybody, and not even herself would know.

Emilia's lips simply tremble as she,

Emilia: “Why, is... Subaru, sleeping th... huh?”

???: “Lia! Huge trouble, it's the Witch Cult! The sins're... why at this timing!?”

Her expression stunned, Emilia fails to accept reality. In contrast to her, Puck flies out in a terribly panicked state.

He flies around Emilia's surroundings as he fixes his glare on Betelgeux, the

only one left standing in the carnage. Puck's black eyes host intense wariness and hostility.

Puck: “Lia! Right now, really right now! Get away from here right now! Meeting that thing... meeting a Cardinal of Sin is an absolute don't! The Trial'll start! If you're saddled with that, it's gonna be something terrifying!”

Emilia: “Puck?”

Puck: “I remembered, just now, finally! Meeting that... meeting him finally made me remember! Why did I forget about this... and there's so many things I still can't recall... so long as it's not like this, make it so I can't remember... but if that's true!”

Facing the sky, stretching his little body out as far as it will go, Puck screams. Puck: “You said different—ECHIDNAAA!!”

His voice echoes loud with panic, loud with loathing. He shakes his head with his breathing ragged. The complete change in this person so familiar to her strikes Emilia speechless.

Having heard the scream, the madman, slowly, stands upright. Beet: “What have we here... Why, I am pleased to MEET YOU!”

Betelgeux's upper body slants aside as he violently yanks at his hair, bustles pulled at out the unmoderated force, droplets of blood welling from his scalp.

Witnessing this self-injury, terror and disgust flash through Emilia's eyes.

Beet: “I am Witch Cult Cardinal of Sin, Bishop of Sloth—Betelgeux ROMANÉE-CONTI!”

Cackling, the madman retains his slanted posture as he stares, observing

Emilia's neck, upper body, practically licking her over.

Beet: "...In, credible."

He lets slip a sigh of wonder.

Peal—the sound of applause. Betelgeux claps his hands, directing his applause at Emilia.

Beet: "INCREDIBLE! How such a form so suited for the vessel! How such a visage so reminiscent of the Witch in life! Should a vessel of such vivacity have been prepared then there is not a single moment TO DEBATE! The Trial! To determine whether the witch factor shall take root, the Trial!"

Puck: "Shut it, madman! You just try taking a single step closer to her! I'll make you regret being born! Entirely!"

Beet: "In face of love, ache and fear and all sum become offerings of sacrifice... you propose no rationale FOR STOPPING!"

With laggard steps the madman approaches—but Puck merely trembles, unable to do anything.

Puck: "Wh, y. Why, does this moment have to be where I... no, that's wrong. I'm remembering. Wrong. Right, that's wrong, wrong! Wrong! I'm... I-I..."⁷

Emilia: "Puck! Wh-what should I... what should I do!? I-I'm... I mean Subaru, over there he's...!"

Beet: “The Trial! I choose the terminus for this diligent soul AS HERE! An occupied vessel will influence the SOUL INJECTED! These innards—ARE UNNEEDED!”

Emilia frantically calls for the distressed Puck. Betelgeux walks on without any hesitation, approaching the confused pair.

Twiddling all his fingers in very strange motions, licking his lips, Betelgeux triggers all of Emilia's internal danger signals to full throttle.

Seeing his crazed eyes, Emilia swallows her breath, and with her voice weak— Emilia: “No... dad, I'm scared...”

She murmurs, clinging for someone to rely on. Seeking help in a voice so quiet, no one would hear it.

Betelgeux completely ignores the whisper, reaching his arms out for Emilia. Next would be him outstretching the invisible UNSEEN HANDS of his Authority of Sloth.

He goes to catch Emilia's rigid body, ready to actualize his evil plot— Puck: “— Get your filthy hands away from my daughter!!”

—And a wall of ice, possessing incredible thickness and height, appears before Emilia.

The wall divides the space between Emilia and Betelgeux, with more of them bursting from the earth to expand the divide.

Instantly, Betelgeux with his once-outstretched UNSEEN HANDS jumps backwards in retreat. Beet: “What—!”

Puck: “Finally, I remembered the most important thing... If it's to protect this, then contracts and bindings and goddamn whatever don't matter for crap. Got bound to this worthless thing, and now, I remember it.”

4 Puck's pronoun changes from his usual 'boku' to 'ore'. Bold I's from Puck are 'ore', italics are 'boku'. I's that are neither bold nor italic mean the line had no pronoun in the Japanese and I added it to make more readable.

Puck's speaking style changes drastically on some lines from this point. If pressed to describe it, I would call it 'a lot like Subaru'. For other lines it sounds more like normal Puck.

Betelgeux's voice trembles, shaken as the cat quietly announces his piece.

All signs of his previous disarray are gone as the spirit glares at the madman, expression liberated.

Puck: “I remember why it's that I'm like this. It's to protect my daughter, finally—if the confine for doing that was this, that damn asshole.”

Emilia: “Puck—a,”

Emilia reaches her fingers out for an irritated Puck, when her throat freezes.

At her breast is a crystal emitting green light. That is the homespace for the spirit Puck, a precious stone tying him and Emilia together.

That crystal, even though she had not touched it, crumbles to dust. Emilia: “Th... wh-why!”

Puck: “I... I broke the confine, so the dues've started. So from the beginning it was taken into consideration even that it'd turn out like this... but that said.”

Turning around, Puck floats down to meet eye level with Emilia.

Emilia's eyes waver in confusion at Puck's actions. As he gazes at her, Puck's expression takes the hue of looking at something beloved.

Puck: "Lia, this's goodbye." Emilia: "Wh..."

Puck: The confine's broken, I can't stay tied to this body any more. The compensation for staying at your side is stolen too, it's impossible. —I'm sorry.

Emilia: "N-No, Puck, don't... I mean, everyone, everyone's gone away... Subaru's, he's... everyone's gone. They're gone! If you go away too, Puck, I... I, alone forever, I... don't wanna..."

Whining like a child, horrendous tears trail from Emilia's eyes.

Puck's long tail wipes away her tears, putting his lips to the point of his crying daughter's nose.

Puck: "Be a good girl and listen now. Ram's still at the mansion. Betty's around. If you absolutely need to, rely on Betty. She'll definitely have to accept this request. Though that said I think it's pretty unfair, knowing that and still requesting her."

Emilia: "I! On someone other than you, I..."

Puck: "—Goodbye. My most cherished in the world, cutest, lovely Emilia."

Emilia: "Wai—"

Before Emilia can say anything, Puck's little body presses hard against her forehead.

Unable to withstand the unexpected force, Emilia's body goes swimming through the air behind her

—when instantly, a tear in space swallows up her slender frame. Emilia: "Wh

—”

Within a blink, Emilia's form disappears from the village.

—Watching all this to the end, Puck gives a long sigh. Puck: “Sorry for pushing you to this, Beatrice.”

He says, offering his apologies to the culprit behind her sudden disappearance. Puck turns around, looking at the Betelgeux staring at him.

Puck: “Just sitting there quietly watching... pretty good manners for a religious crazy, huh.”

Beet: “It appeared that the instant I lifted a hand, you would be struck with urge to DESTROY ME. Should I proceed to the mansion events will be entirely the SAME REGARDLESS. Purposeful aggravations were ENTIRELY UNNECESSARY.”

Puck: “Got it. You go around like a crackpot, but your head's in surprisingly decent working order.

—You damned scum.”

Spits Puck, scaling the wall of ice to reach Betelgeux's end.

Not even Betelgeux pulls anything so reckless as attacking with UNSEEN HAND halfway through Puck's migration.

They face each other, keeping a fixed distance between them.

Puck: “There's no time. —Get it started quick and get it ended quick. Everything afterwards I'll be dumping to my trusty little sister.”

Beet: "Your tempo feels to HAVE CHANGED. For a spirit, you stink of human."
Puck: "—Yeah probably would."

Puck rubs his little hand against his pink nose, smiling cynically.

Puck: "This's what I'm like now, but before my arms and legs were just a little longer, and if you can believe it my face wouldda been handsome. When my daughter's that cute, don't you think that's only natural?"

Beet: "...Your statements ADDLE ME."

Puck: "Well, nevermind it. You don't need to understand it... since anyway, you're dying here." Puck points his arms towards Betelgeux as his body begins turning white.

He is running out of mana, and losing ability to keep ahold of his body. This would be influenced from his breaking of ties with Emilia, and probably also have to do with the breaking of the confine he mentioned.

Either way, the contours of his form begin to fade—

Puck: "Before I'm gone, you're gone. My partner in death's a religious nut, gross."

Beet: "I REGRET TO TELL that for bringing about my cessation, abolishing this body accomplishes
—"

Puck: "I'm freezing your soul alongside. —I do that, and then what happens?"

Up until now having kept an unshakable, fearless smile, Betelgeux's

expression freezes. The madman's eyes shoot open wide. Puck smiles as if in utter enjoyment.

Puck: “Ahha—now there's the face I wanted to see, moron.”

Simultaneous with the outline of the spirit unlacing, a white radiance blasts forth, and—

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—Forced to witness ended worlds in sequence, Subaru lies toppled on the ground. He couldn't exactly tell where he was anymore.

Was this reality, or was it a dream? Was he having one of the repeating nightmares? Supposing he determined them as nightmares, would he be permitted to sort everything up and away?

Were they purely just potentials? Or did they actually happen? Or weren't they just Subaru's brain coming up with very convenient worlds? If so then what was with them, flowing with all this information Subaru obviously didn't know?

Worlds born from delusion? Were the differing realities encroaching on each other? Whichever possibility it was, the torment to Subaru's heart was colossal.

So colossal that he could not stand, not straight, not raise his head, not at all. And so—

???: “Are you no longer able to stand? Subaru-kun?”

He hears someone at his side, speaking words to tenderly uplift his heart. That was the voice of someone precious, he feels.

Subaru: “—”

The hot track of a tear which should not be spilling draws its trail down Subaru's cheek.

Chapter 73: Weakness's Hideaway

—How long had it been since he had last heard that voice? In reality, she had not been sleeping for that long a time.

At best a week—a conceivable timespan for going without seeing friends or family. —But Subaru could not think that way.

For a Subaru who abandoned his life continuously and continuously to redo time, actual timespans held no meaning. By his soul's internal clock, a much more gargantuan span had passed since that voice had last made tremble his ears, his heart.

???: “—Please wake up, Subaru-kun. I would be happy to see your face.” Words rain down from above as he lies face-down on the ground.

The affection brimming in that voice, that passionate fondness, swiftly fill Subaru's heart with something warm. The parched, empty vessel what was his heart, permeates with heat.

By just two sentences spoken by that gentle voice.

—Just how much strength was it that she gave him? Subaru: “...You're joking.”

Her: “No, it is not a joke.” Subaru: “You can't be here.”

Her: “Should you desire it, Subaru-kun, I will be at your side at any moment.”

Subaru: “When I most want something done, and only then... you'll always, come to me... as if, something that... convenient could...”

Her: “Well, I am constantly seeking to be your most convenient girl, Subaru-kun.” His voice laced with sobs, Subaru lets spill his pathetic whining.

But this voice was assuredly not looking down on him, or failing to perceive

him. She knew. Her.

Knew that Subaru was weak, hopeless, so brittle that he could not live without something to cling to, always without confidence, always in doubt.

Because this was the girl who, regardless of Subaru's incapacity to be strong, told him she loved him.

Subaru: “—Rem.”

Rem: “Yes. This is Subaru-kun's Rem.” He raises his head.

Blue arises in his teary vision.

He roughly wipes his eyes with his dirtied sleeve, abolishing the tears. He looks. At the sight of the girl, standing before him.

At the sight of darling Rem. Subaru: “Rehm...”

Rem: “Yes, this is Rem. A maid who will unfailingly be within arm's reach whenever Subaru-kun wants her there.”

Subaru: “Y, ou...”

Tilting her head, playing with Subaru in a rather joking manner, is Rem.

Before he can say anything about her attitude, Subaru feels the air peacefully escape from his lungs. The heaviness in his heart drops away with a thunk.

His breathing eases, the tiny wailing him inside his skull vanishing to somewhere.

So easily, so so easily saved, Subaru is stunned.

He had believed himself so absolutely without hope and deadlocked, and simply by having this one single girl before him, everything comes unravelled this easily.

Subaru: “God you're amazing, Rem...”

Rem: “I appreciate that very much. You're incredible too, Subaru-kun.”

The words she speaks as she smiles fit together with how they, as usual, don't really fit together. Inadvertently feeling happiness even at this back-and-forth, Subaru fails to keep enduring it, coming close to crying.

Still seated slovenly on the ground with his eyes downcast, Rem kneels down before him. Rem: “Do you feel all right? Are you, worn out?”

Subaru: “Who knows... am I worn out? ...But I haven't done anything yet.”

This loop has seen Subaru battered around entirely, without him reaching even a single correct answer. He was in no position to be saying that he was worn out.

Everyone would anguish more. Everyone would hurt more. Why did everyone have to suffer? The answer there was obvious.

Subaru: “Because I'm weak.” Rem: “—”

Subaru: “Because my ability is lacking.” Rem: “—”

Subaru: “If I were stronger, smarter, a man who could do more... things'd be

over without everyone suffering, sorrowing, hurting...”

If Subaru were strong enough to do everything, absolutely everything on his own, then working with Emilia to face her past, soothing of Beatrice's heart abraded over four hundred years of isolation, rescuing of Petra and Frederica otherwise murdered, protecting SANCTUARY's people assaulted by the Sizeable Hare, coming to understanding with Garfiel as he attempts to distance the outsiders, would all be within his ability.

Everything, all of it, from start to finish, was Subaru's fault.

And so with that final balance sheet of weakness, Subaru needed to scour away his own soul.

—Is what he had thought, and still. Subaru: “Is there anybody... that I saved?”
Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “If worlds continue after I die, then how many times, places, people... did I leave everyone to die?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “How many times did I let you die? How many times do I... need to kill you?” Rem: “—Subaru-kun.”

With dread trembling up from the core of his body, Subaru rapidly confesses his sins.

Spit them all out, and immediately, hopefully get his pronouncement. Before he could wrack his own mind to nothing, he desired that someone, nearby, sentence him.

He desired that someone smack this colossal idiot—who while pledging to no longer make mistakes, had tread down the wrong path on their very first step—and let them know what a hopeless moron they were.

Rem: “—”

—But what the punishment-seeking Subaru receives, is a kind, enveloping embrace. Subaru: “Re, hm.”

Rem: “Everything is okay. You're okay, Subaru-kun.” Subaru: “But, noth... nothing is, okay...”

Subaru had accomplished absolutely nothing.

There were many people who would go unsaved if Subaru didn't rescue them. There were many people who would meet horrific ends. And Rem too, was someone Subaru needed to save.

She was entirely qualified to lambaste the eternally inadequate, insufficient, weak Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “You should... at me...!” Rem: “—I love you.”

She meets her forehead to his, and simply, whispers her love. Subaru: “—”

No words will exit him.

There is nothing he can say now.

So near, as those blue eyes gaze entirely straight at Subaru. He could drown in the depths of the mercy in those eyes.

Rem: “I love you, Subaru-kun. —And so everything is all okay.” Subaru: “That... isn't, an answer...”

Rem: “Yes, it is. Why is it I am here? Why is it I forgive you? Why is it that I hold you? —All of it, is entirely that.”

At range close enough to feel her breath, Rem's smile grasps Subaru's heart with an invisible hand. He can't move. He can't even twitch. Reaching around his back, the small hands grip hard onto his clothes, strong and even stronger, so strong the two could be one, as she hugs him.

Rem: "It must have been rough, Subaru-kun." Subaru: "—"

Rem: "All alone, being this hurt... it must have been hard, Subaru-kun."
Subaru: "—hk"

Rem: "You don't need to experience this sadness any more."

Rem's sweet enunciation continues.

Gently unravelling Subaru's heart, melting away his obstinacy.

Rem: "All of your hurt, your pain, your weakness, I will shoulder as substitute." Subaru: "..."

Rem: "Everything you willed to protect, to fight, to complete... I ask you will entrust to me." Subaru: "..."

Rem: "There is no necessity at all for you to carry every single burden. —Task everything to me, for now you may rest peacefully, and sleep." Subaru: "...I,"

Rem: "Please show me once again the Subaru-kun that I love."

With her hand set against his cheek, Rem raises Subaru's head to look at him straight on. Her lips pause maybe in hesitation, and slowly, her face approaches his.

Even his laggard consciousness can comprehend what she is doing, and what will be done to him.

Immediately near, within breathing range, the lips of a darling girl loom in.

Would it not be fine to overlay, to intertwine, luxuriate, acquiesce and drown?

—She was already pardoning him whether he was right or wrong. Just to what extent had Rem's words gently permeated Subaru's heart?

His frayed emotions, his soul shrieking for someone to reach out, were by this girl who understood everything of Subaru, right now, saved again.

To powerless Subaru, Rem offered her hand.

To brittle Subaru's back, Rem offered her support. To foolish Subaru's path, Rem offered her escort.

Imposing on those, clinging, depending completely—if that would guide to the correct answer, then...

Where was the point in struggling alone?

He was abraded wholly, he didn't know where his footing lie, he no longer knew which was the direction to walk, and so, on absolutely everything, just give up, yield—

???: <It is easy to give up.> Subaru: “—”

???: <But.>

Subaru: “—”

???: <—It does not suit you.> A voice.

Rem: “—Subaru-kun?”

Rem's voice, puzzled, from in front of him.

But of course it would, as her face so close, once mere moments from touching him now has its path blocked by a hand.

Distanced from the touch of their sweet, supposedly to-entwine tongues, a somewhat wounded glint lights up in Rem's wavering eyes.

Gazing at that shaking light from between the cracks in his fingers, Subaru speaks. Subaru: “—Who are you?”

Rem: “Huh?”

Subaru: “I just asked, who are you?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, what are you... asking who, is...”

Rem's throat seems to cramp as Subaru's low-voiced question leads her to falter.

The dim anguish in her eyes grows thicker, traces of misery etching themselves into her expression. Incredibly, that felt to be clawing at onlooking Subaru's chest from inside and out.

To distract from the sensation Subaru presses down on his heart, baring his teeth.

Subaru: “When... I'm hopeless at the end of my rope, seriously wishing that someone'll do something, thinking maybe it's impossible and about to give up... you would come to me. I seriously believed that.”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “When it's you then surely, when I'm so stuck, here hugging my

knees, ruminating and irresolute, then you'd hold yourself against me, you'd be kind to me. I believed that.”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “You'd listen to my whining, let me spew out my whining, let me wring myself out on tears and everything until the tap's all dry...”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “—And say, stand up.”

Natsuki Subaru remembered with all his soul the daintiness of her fingers, the warmth of her skin, the scale of her love.

And so crystal clear, to this Rem—to this imposter, he'd well damn say it.
Subaru: “She would not say 'rest now.'”

Rem?: “—”

Subaru: “She would not say 'give up, task everything to me.'” Rem?: “—”

Subaru: “Loving me, loving her, kind to me, in love with me—and more than anyone in the world

strict on me, unsparing to me, that girl is Rem!”

Springing to his feet, Subaru howls as he takes distance from this Rem before him, keeping her in his sights.

Still on her knees, Rem looks up at Subaru from her low position wordlessly.

Even now he could about drown from the sadness in her expression at being rejected.

Rem: “No, no no. Please listen, Subaru-kun! I, I was wrong. Just, I couldn't bear watching you in suffering... and so, I merely, I wanted you to forget the pain and rest for now, that was all!”

Subaru: “I'll let you see my weakness. I'll let you see my frailty. I'll let you see that I'm a pathetic, worthless bastard. —But I'll never let you see me giving up.”

Subaru is a hero, Rem had said.

I will act being as Rem's hero, Natsuki Subaru had decided.

Ever since they shared their promise, Subaru had resolved.

—That in this world, this universe, the only time he could show his weakness, was when with Rem.

When with the Rem who knew Subaru was weak, but even so believed in his efforts to act with strength, was the only time Subaru could go without hiding the fact he was weak.

Not to Emilia, not to Beatrice, not to anyone else could he show it.

The only person could a Subaru who needed to be strong show his weakness to was Rem.

Subaru: “My weakness belongs to Rem. She hides all of my weakness, and in exchange even if I have to grapple it in tight, I'm not letting my surrender happen.”

Rem?: “—”

Subaru: “Fuck off, you fake. —Don't goddamn coddle me wearing my Rem's face and voice!” That firmly declared, Subaru jabs his fist out at Rem—at the imposter.

The listener is lost for words. They cast their gaze down, standing silently on the spot. Rem: “Th-this, was, wasn't... what sh... she, t-told... me.”

Subaru: “Ah?”

Tilting their head with blue hair swaying, the imposter stutters out her words. Hearing it rises questions for Subaru, when—

Rem: “—”

Right before him, her form seeming to blur, Rem's visage turns unclear.

A storm of television-haze static drowns out his vision, and in a blink at that spot there appears someone completely different.

—Someone he's never seen before.

Her pink hair stretches halfway down her back, her mien gentle—or more rather, timid. Her facial features are attractive, but that did not mean her face as a whole was outstandingly beautiful.

Something more of an ordinary, normal-person kind of cuteness.

She wears a long-sleeved white outfit, her hands not peeking out the ends as she puts her palms to her cheeks, looking at Subaru nervously.

Subaru: "Who're you?"

Rem: "I-I'm the WITCH OF LUST.... Camilla. Ni... nice to, meet you... mm."

Subaru inadvertently swallows his breath.

She's introducing herself as the WITCH OF LUST. Meaning,

Subaru: "This weird unexplained room... is in Echidna's dream, then."

Camilla: "Yes, but also, no... maybe. Echidna-chan's, watching the... TRIAL, and TRIAL's always... kind of, like a dream... mhm... yeah."

Subaru: "That's not really getting to the point or actually no before that..."

Camilla's manner of speech irks Subaru. Seeing his gaze spontaneously turn harsh, a huge shudder runs through Camilla's body as she winds up hugging her head.

Camilla: "Sto... d-don't, hit me..."

Subaru: "I'm not gonna do that. Not gonna do it, but... what were you plotting with that?" Camilla: "With... that?"

Subaru: "Putting on Rem's shape, and standing in front of me! Is that what your power is!?"

All of these witches crowned with deadly sins inevitably will have some kind of ridiculous authority.

If the WITCH OF LUST is no exception, yes indeed she should have an authority. If her transformation from before was it, then—

Subaru: “Man transformation's a really orthodox power compared to the other witches.”

Camilla: “I-I was, wasn't... transforming... though? I-If I look... looked like, someone else then... that's b-beca... because, you wanted to see... that... yeah?”

Subaru: “What?”

Camilla: “I, mean... I didn't even... w-want to, meet you. E-Echidna-chan, told me to... come, so... and she, lied... too...”

Mumbles Camilla, her words exacerbating Subaru's annoyance.

The way she talks, the way she glances around, the way she lowers her eyes when she senses his gaze on her, absolutely all of it grinds his gears. And that sissyish way she speaks, and her sulky complaints.

Being that what she's trying to say isn't communicating clearly, she could not know how important a thing for Subaru she had just stomped all over.

Irritating. Aggravating. He'd like to start raving, make her know it. Subaru: “Do you... do you understand what the fuck it is you just did?”

Camilla: “Echidna-chan, said... I-I, just had to... spoil him, but... and that, doing that... it'd all work... out fine, but it was... like that... a-and I, I even told her I... didn't wanna.”

Subaru: “Listen to me!!”

Camilla: “Eeveryone's... ganging up, to... pick on me, is what... they're doing. Echidna-chan's d-doing it. She's, is, she's awful... aw... awful.”

Subaru: “Can you not hear that I'm telling you to listen!!”

Subaru attempts to shout, when he notices that his lungs are squeezed of air and his voice is frail. Notices it, but his lovebent rage is far more important and instantly dispels that fact from his considerations.

Suffocation was a trivial matter when faced with something so annoying it makes him want to claw at his own chest.

He'd shut that whiner's mouth, slap her with all the anger and suffering he had, make her comprehend just what she had d—

???: “Any more than that'll be life-threatening.” Subaru: “—!?”

That instant, Subaru hears a voice whispering at his ear as he regains his sanity.

The moment he does, what assaults him is the agony of being on the border of total asphyxiation for having been kept in a state of oxygen deprivation, and the pain of his dry eyes for having kept them continuously open.

Subaru: “Aau—ah, hahhh?”

???: “They were drastic measures, but just as long you're back. —When faced with Camilla, with Lust's FACELESS GODDESS, people forget to breathe. Ultimately, forget even for their heart to beat.”

Subaru: “Eghu, ghhah... ha, haa.”

The choking prompts Subaru to spit as he falls with all limbs to the ground, his thoughts strobing. But the voice does pass into his ear, and the meaning of its words does communicate to his brain.

Thus Subaru wipes his mouth with his sleeve, looks at up the one who supposedly set up everything about this station, and scowls.

Subaru: “What th—what the fuck were you plotting, Echidna?”

Faced with Subaru's hateful gaze, the white-haired witch strokes at her hair as in the now meadowlands she puts her elbow to the table and her cheek to her palm.

Echidna: “Isn't it a given? —I'm a witch. The plot's something nefarious.” She says, smiling.

Chapter 74: Witch's Plot And Proposal

Panting in asphyxiation, Subaru belatedly realises that his hands are on a meadow's green.

The thick scent of grass skims up from the ground his limbs are touching and into his nose. Like a grassland bathed in sunlight after rain, the chokey and natural air wraps fleetingly around Subaru.

Turning his neck, Subaru sees Echidna before him.

Like usual, she is arranging preparations for a tea party on the meadow's hillock with its table and chairs as she waits for her guest—for Subaru.

Like usual. —Just like usual.

Echidna: “I'm sure you have things you want to say and questions you want to ask, but... first how do you feel about sitting down and having a cup of tea?”

Subaru: “...Do you think, having considered what you just did to me, that I'm going to cordially sit in that chair? Or comply with your tea party at all?”

Echidna: “You'll comply. You're someone capable of giving mercenary, faux-calm rational thought precedence over your instinct to fly into self-abandoning rage. Right now, a profitable conversation with me has more benefits to you than shirking a conversation with me... would be what you've concluded, right?”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru speaks low with suppressed anger. Echidna's carefree attitude stays

healthy as ever.

Her words come spoken from above, as if mocking Subaru and his attempts to engage in an obvious ploy. They strike a perfect bullseye, Subaru unable to choose either affirmation or denial.

The thing she had trampled over was not so cheap that Subaru would so easily acquiesce. Subaru: “Echidna... tell me you didn't mean it.”

Echidna: “Hm?”

Subaru: “That... thing with the Witch of Lust, tell me that you didn't mean for that. Please say it was your bad.”

Echidna: “...”

Subaru: “Say that it was unavoidable. That you didn't anticipate it, that it shouldn't've gone like that. Please tell me this. If you do... I won't fault you.”

What Echidna's saying is correct.

If he was to proceed ahead, then he needed her knowledge, her cooperation.

But the unforgivable is the unforgivable. Echidna's utilization of the Witch of Lust to trespass into Subaru's inviolable and precious domain—his SANCTUARY—was reality.

And so as far as Subaru was concerned, this was an essential requirement for forgiving Echidna, and complying to a profitable conversation with her.

Echidna: “...Just when I was wondering what you'd say.”

In this instant, Echidna must have come to comprehend Subaru's inner weakness and obstinacy. Echidna's mutter was an inadvertent one. Subaru bites

his lip as he waits for her reply, Echidna looking at him as she leisurely fiddles with the ends of her white hair.

Echidna: “Exactly as your wish states, that was the Witch of Lust Camilla running amok. I tried to stop her, but she didn't listen me. She took advantage of the TRIAL with intent to beguile you, unveiled the places you least want touched, and attempted to submerge you.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “You narrowly managed to escape just as she was about to trick you. Having failed her in beguilement, Camilla let down her guard, which is when I stole back predominance and summoned you to my castle. You could call it a godsend that we're able to face each other right now.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “...supposing I told you all that, would you be satisfied?”

Lining up everything Subaru wants to hear, Echidna undermines all of it at the end. Subaru wordlessly looks upward, separating his gaze from Echidna.

Subaru: “...What were you trying to do, goading that witch on like that.”

Echidna: “Camilla didn't say? That with how the TRIAL had near entirely abraded your heart, she wanted to save you?”

Subaru: “That wasn't what the Witch of Lust was really thinking. If what she

said's right then that was what I wanted Rem to tell me, the definition of self-issued weakness. The Witch of Lust's got no reason be fond with me. ...You instructed her.”

Echidna: “It's impressive you got this much off so little information. ...In that case, doubt excuses will work here.”

Echidna easily stops with the glossings over and gives a shrug. Ferrying her teacup to her mouth and taking a sip,

Echidna: “Just as you suspect, sending out Camilla, and her presentation as a girl in your heart, were both on my instruction. It being penetrated and failing to carry to the end is more of a problem on Camilla's end than mine, though.”

Subaru: “...Why did you pull that?”

Echidna: “Hearing it said straight-out is probably going to make you mad. — Because it was the most efficient method, and more importantly the method with the highest probability.”

Subaru's expression vanishes. Echidna continues without hesitation.

Echidna: “It was outside even my predictions that the second TRIAL would catch you at this timing. But most importantly, that its contents would stab into you so deeply was, speaking with entire honesty, something I hadn't envisioned at all until I actually witnessed it.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “Oop, I'd appreciate you overlooking that I was peeping on the TRIAL. I'm pretty sure I told you about this back at the first TRIAL too, but you do get that these are TRIALS set up by a witch? The mean-spirited punchline comes included. ...and such and such fault-finding I don't really enjoy.”

Subaru: “...Get back to explaining.”

Echidna: “Anyway, while I was watching you brave the TRIAL, I had a thought. —If he's made to keep challenging the TRIAL alone like this, it won't be long before he's entirely eroded. ...There's the thought.”

Her stance on this is likely no exaggeration, but really what would've happened. Subaru had been paying enough attention to his situation that he could not refute her.

The second TRIAL—the uncomeatable present—and the scenes, events, tragedies he was forced to witness. This thing was more than enough to utterly destroy Subaru's bravado, stubbornness, and misconstrusion.

Echidna: “And so I intervened. Your complete erosion is yet another possible result. I execute trial and error on everything there is, experiment everything possible. Because my curiosity is constantly wailing its desire for theoretical conclusions without ever getting bored of it. To sate my insatiable greed, I seek every single result out there. —The result of you challenging the TRIAL, and breaking, is no exception.”

Subaru: “Then why'd you intervene? If my breaking is one of these results you're looking for, you shouldn't've minded just leaving me there. If you get the result that actually that was all I amounted to after all, that should've satisfied

you, yeah?”

Echidna: “Of course I have a perspective of accepting things as yet another possible result. ...I do, but that doesn't mean I'll do nothing to get the results I desire.”

Subaru: “What?”

Echidna's tone drops as she speaks.

Hearing it, Subaru for the first time here knits his brows in something other than anger. Scrutinizing the meaning of her words, and putting them together into definite shape, that means—

Subaru: “To reject the result of me eroding and disappearing to nothing... you set up that situation, is what you're saying?”

Echidna: “...And as a result, I trespassed on territory precious to you, and I have no excuse for that. If you're going to shower me with insults, I will resignedly accept it. Your anger is correct, and my selfishness is incorrect. That's all that's happened here.”

Setting her cup on the table, Echidna gazes straight-on at Subaru at the foot of the hill.

The silliness and caprice she had shown until now is entirely gone, as the Witch of Greed faces Subaru with all of her sincerity.

Her attitude, her stance, her words, overwhelm him.

His heart had been entirely occupied with inexpressable fury and distrust toward Echidna, but now those emotions seemed horrifically egotistic and self-serving.

While a strong reluctance to call the previous situation as Echidna's help still remains, just what state would Subaru's mind be in if Echidna had not acted?

On the tomb's cold floor, mind broken, pulverised, in an impenetrable darkness without even the faintest of light, disappeared entirely. Not a difficult scene to imagine.

He can't convey her any words of gratitude. But, he could not think her someone who deserved a showering of anger and curses. —That was his emotional compromise.

Subaru: “—”

Wordlessly standing up, Subaru brushes the grass off him as he heads for the hilltop.

Sitting in her chair, a pained look flashes through Echidna's expression as she watches Subaru approach. It seems that not even the centuries-old witch can determine just what words Subaru's about to pummel her with.

Thirst for knowledge incarnate. WITCH OF GREED. The fact he could make twist the expression of even someone like this gives Subaru's mind a slight relief.

Echidna: “—au,”

Echidna cries out slightly in surprise as Subaru pulls out the chair opposite, and sits.

He certainly isn't bringing his cup to his lips, but he is expressing intention to talk. Echidna looks at Subaru with unease as he puts his elbow to the table and his cheek in his hand, averting his gaze from Echidna.

Subaru: “No appetite for 'Chidna tea. ...But I will be getting a profitable conversation out of you.” Swallowing down his unbearable emotions, Subaru displays tolerance enough to comply.

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Subaru: “So what was the second TRIAL, actually?”

Still with cheek in hand, Subaru asks without looking at Echidna.

Echidna shifts the position of her seat as she responds, slanting forward to get into Subaru's view. Echidna: “What do you think it was?”

Subaru: “Dodging the subject... or actually you're not. This you saying I'm asking too much in

suddenly trying to get an answer, really?”

Echidna: “I'm not considering anything so mean-spirited. It's since I wound up doing something which would make you angry. I'm just thinking to check that we can have friendly conversation, but also that I want to hear your voice some more.”

Those were incredibly embarrassing words for someone to hear.

If Subaru had been braving this conversation in his baseline mental state, with no hustle at all, then he would likely have been discomposed and wound up getting stuck on his words.

But Subaru's present mentality is one that surely wouldn't be giving Echidna the reactions she wants. He gives a small sigh as his reply.

Subaru: “The TRIAL's opener is WITNESS THE UNCOMEATABLE PRESENT.

That's the preface, and that's the scenes it shows. ...Uncomeatable present probably means a PRESENT which, sometime during the period it took for me to wind up where I am now, went down a different path than what leads to the current situation.”

It's the same kind of idea as a visual novel.

The player chooses down which path to proceed at important moments, opening different storylines and possibilities. Think about it somewhat extravagantly, and visual novels are magnificent games wherein whole lives themselves unfold.

Echidna: “They're universes you fundamentally shouldn't be able to witness. They may be infinitely happier than the real PRESENT, and you'll regret that things aren't like that universe. Or perhaps they may be infinitely sadder than the real PRESENT, and you'll feel grateful that you are where you are now. — The reality of the second TRIAL is to witness these differing PRESENTS, and see if you can affirm the PRESENT which correctly should be, is about what it is.”

Following off from Subaru, Echidna succinctly explains the second Trial.

It's practically identical to what Subaru had envisioned. If you exclude the part where it wound up being a deeply, violently penetrating ordeal for Subaru and only for Subaru.

Subaru: “—Do the alternate PRESENTS I saw actually exist?” Echidna: “...”

Subaru: “When I die, I RETURN BY DEATH right there. So I've never seen what happens after my death. ...and even before that, I've never considered that the world continues on after my death.

...No, I've been trying not to consider it.”

Well, of course.

Subaru's RETURNING BY DEATH occurs when the world has fallen into an unsalvagable checkmate. By affirming RETURNS BY DEATH made for the sake of breaking through the deadlock, saving those dear to him, and reaching the optimum future, he had put up with the sensation of spending his life.

If worlds exist after his death, that pulls the fundamental portion of his premise out from under him. While also to keep himself mentally stable, believing that NO WORLDS THAT I HAVE LEFT BEHIND EXIST allowed Subaru to save the people of the maybe-present WORLDS LEFT BEHIND.

And so,

Subaru: “Even after I die, the world goes on... maybe? My choices make worlds diverge, and there in the world where I blundered and miscarried everything, everyone I didn't protect is there...?”

Echidna says nothing.

Subaru: “What is it, Echidna. ...Please tell me.”

Having lost the option to keep abstaining from looking at her, Subaru pleads as he directs his gaze to the forward-slanted Echidna.

Wordless, and bathed in Subaru's attention, Echidna thoughtfully rubs her chin. She closes her eyes. Echidna: “There's one thing I have to put out there about the TRIAL.”

Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “The presents in the second TRIAL are entirely a phenomena which show scenes from fabricated worlds. The challenger taking the TRIAL... that'd be you this time. Taking influence from all the way into the details in your memory, the MEMORIES OF THE WORLD withdraws the people who make up your surroundings, the world, the atmosphere, even the mana, and aligns the necessary past, present, and future information to create a PRESENT.”

Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “Meaning that is entirely a well-made UNREALITY. The degree of their reconstruction is on an entirely different dimension from your self-produced imaginings and delusions, and as a fake reality those things would potentially occur. But, they're start-to-finish ARTIFICIAL UNREALITIES. If questioning whether they really happened, the answer is not affirmative.”

Subaru: “Th-then...”

Echidna: “However.”

Hearing Echidna's explanation, Subaru raises his head in hope. But Echidna faces out her palm, interrupting him.

Echidna: “The details behind the principles of your RETURN BY DEATH are unclear. It's almost certain that the agent for your RETURN BY DEATH is the Witch of Envy, but as to how the WITCH OF ENVY is making you RETURN BY DEATH leaves questions unending. It may be a power which uses your death as a trigger to rewind the world. Potentially, it may be that it overwrites the you in a maybe-there-maybe-not alternate universe so called a parallel universe, with the present YOU.”

Subaru: “Au...”

Echidna: “Hypothetically assuming that the latter principle is truth, then worlds in parallel universes exist, and even after your death, the worlds without YOU would continue.”

Subaru: “W-ways to confirm that would be...” Echidna: “—None.”

Echidna shakes her head.

His eyes open wide, Subaru's jaw drops as he is struck dumb. Echidna gives Subaru a sympathizing kind of gaze, rapping her fingers on the edge of the table.

Echidna: “If we're to assume there is a way to confirm, it would be to get the answer out of the WITCH OF ENVY herself. But I'm sure you're already well aware that that would be difficult?”

Echidna must be talking about Subaru's memories from when he first truly met the WITCH OF ENVY. After leaving the tea party and exiting the tomb, there the WITCH OF ENVY welcomed him.

Stole Emilia's body, tore Garfiel to bits, consumed SANCTUARY itself in shadow, a genuine monster.

—Subaru suddenly remembers some doubts he had about the circumstances of the thing's appearance.

Subaru: “Ri, ght... Echidna. Before, after the tea party ended... outside, I saw the Witch in SANCTUARY. What was that? Just what was that?”

Echidna: “You already know this, but that was the WITCH OF ENVY. Although, that was a knock-off far removed from the real thing. The flesh-vessel it chose

was immature, and most importantly the seal hasn't moved an inch. With its witch factor impaired, it's inconceivable it could act with the power it had in its heyday.”

Subaru: “That was far removed from its heyday...?”

Although having been a monster that made short work of transformed Garfiel and killed absolutely everything without sustaining even a scratch, that had been nothing comparable to the real WITCH OF ENVY.

Just how much of a hell had it been 400 years ago, when the Witch was actually parading about the place?

Echidna: “Just as you have imagined, the trigger for its exiting outside was the tea party. Not even that thing can bind you by the taboo here. Thus it went crazed with jealousy, left to vent its resentment outside, had a tantrum and went ballistic.”

Subaru: “Did you know that'd fucking happen?”

Echidna: “I certainly did not. I'm speaking about the outset. Seeing how things had turned out, the outset probably came from that. ...is the hypothesis that I reached. That I can make no conclusions without truly witnessing the outcomes is a point where even I, the Witch of Greed, am no different from you all.”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru is lost for words at Echidna and her objective stance, which shows no signs of collapsing. He could reproach her, but nothing would come of it. Despite being aware of this fact, there is a vexation to be had.

If she just felt like it, if she just felt like collaborating with Subaru, then potentially—

Echidna: “I doubt there's any great reason behind why your loved was chosen as the vessel. Her body's also a half-elf, so maybe there might've been some ease of adaptation there, but I'd say the biggest reason would be nothing other than ENVY.”

Subaru: “Envy...?”

Echidna: “When you're a witch trying to monopolize your affection, how is it strange to hate someone who's so enthusiastically getting your attention, and want to destroy them?”

Loving someone insanely meant desiring to be loved by them in equal turn. If that someone directed their love at another, then the hazard known as LOVE could prompt acts of insanity done to redirect the someone's focus onto oneself.

So that was why the Witch of Envy keeps materializing, then?

Echidna: “Everything you're puzzling over is likely something only the WITCH OF ENVY would know.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “You can mull over it endlessly, but in honest opinion, it's unlikely you'll reach an answer. Not about that spectacle which cornered you in, and most importantly not about those MAYBE-THERE-MAYBE-NOT PRESENTS, will you get a true conclusion.”

Subaru: “Th, at is...”

There's really nothing to call it except Subaru's cruel reality.

He wanted to be clearly refuted. “These post-death worlds you saw don't exist.”

If that was no good then he wanted a definite affirmation. “Your conceit has sacrificed many.”

Whichever answer it was, Subaru would have surely kept the response as a precept, as a lynchpin, as something not to forget—then grit his teeth, spill tears of blood, and even with his soul wailing its misery, step onward.

—Getting an answer saying that no answer existed was remarkably cruel.

Still without any affirmations or denials, with matters of the world still inconclusive, live!

Without knowing whether he had trampled over what he had trampled over. Without being able to acknowledge that he has abandoned what he has abandoned. Was being unable to acknowledge his sins as sins his punishment?

Had Natsuki Subaru committed a sin so accordingly great, that no one could forgive it?

Nobody was capable of casting judgement on Subaru. Couldn't denounce him either. He understood that.

—But would nobody let even Subaru himself do it?

Echidna: “I think it's harsh. But, I also think all there's possibly to do is rationalize.”

Overwhelmed and without words is Subaru, when Echidna addresses him. He lifts his head sluggishly, looking at Echidna with his eyes empty.

Echidna swallows her breath, and with a serious expression,

Echidna: “Speaking in extremes, the second TRIAL is to accept WHAT THERE ONLY IS NOW, and rationalizing that the PRESENTS other than the PRESENT are entirely unreachable alternate worlds.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “For you, who has reason more than other challengers to recognize that perhaps these alternate worlds may truly exist, I'm sure it's difficult. But still, it's time to switch.”

Subaru: “Switch?”

Echidna: “Your choices indeed may have left numerous sacrifices in their wake. I'm sure that among those you've left behind, there are many which are beyond reclamation. But spending your life entirely counting those you've left behind, those who are gone, is miserable. It's empty. It's painful, wouldn't you think?”

Subaru: “If we're just going to be talking off emotion logic, how about we don't. ...It's really something saying this but do you actually think run-of-the-mill counselling's enough to do something about this experience?”

Echidna's words are pleasant, comforting ones.

Were they in response to a shallower wound, a less serious crime, to a lower-scale event, perhaps they may have had some effects.

Potentially he would have felt saved, and been capable of that SWITCH. But,

Subaru: “That doesn't change that the payback for what I've done is unworkable. It doesn't change that I thought everything I left behind disappeared, didn't exist, and from that I've been piling sacrifices is possible.”

Echidna: “...You're correct.”

Subaru: “What do I have to do so I can approve of myself in this situation? Is there something I can do so that I can forgive me? I pushed aside the deliverance you offered me. I don't want to be saved by a counterfeit Rem. I'm bringing the real Rem back, eventually. —But.”

Taking a breath, Subaru's face twists into a mess.

Subaru: “—Is the Rem I eventually bring back, truly going to be the same Rem I want to save?” Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “So long as that question goes unanswered, this mental deadlock's not changing. ...Are you seriously telling me I can do something about that, ordering me to rationalize it?”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “Rather than counting who I haven't saved, live while counting those I

have... that, is seriously what you're telling me?"

What followed in the statements Echidna wished to tell Subaru was a kind of hope. Those words would even for Subaru, perhaps bestow hope.

—However, the darkness into which Subaru had declined was not shallow enough for him to consider them as hope.

Subaru: "With this run-of-the-mill emotional logic, you're seriously... telling me to, fight..." Echidna: "—I am."

Subaru: "—"

Echidna: "I, am, telling you, that."

Dispelling the words of comfort, Subaru cries out from the depths of despair. Echidna speaks—slowly, piece by piece, looking Subaru straight in the eye.

Echidna: "Rather than counting the many you may not have saved, you should count the many you have saved. The path you've travelled in getting here, I have been watching."

Subaru: "You, what're... what could you, about me..."

Echidna: "I have been watching you live doing your utmost, your very best, and arriving to this moment. And so I can say it. Indeed I can."

Subaru: "—"

Echidna: “On the path you have walked thus far, not a single thing you have done has been worthless. Nobody has the right to call your utmost INSUFFICIENT. You've gone throwing out everything you can do, and ventured here to this point. —That is something to be proud of.”

Echidna's sincere words strike Subaru's empty heart. Something inside his hollow chest resounds.

—But, it isn't enough. Those words would not spur him to stand.

She could say it was something to be proud of, but in reality Subaru had miscarried on many things. Things he should have been able to do something about. If it were someone other than Subaru working with the same conditions, they would've done it fine. But since the person in those places had been Subaru, many had gone without rescue.

That was Subaru's crime. Subaru's wrongdoing. The sin for Subaru to accept, and indemnify. Subaru: “There is no one who can forgive me.”

Echidna: “I will forgive you. Who knows of this, I will.”

Subaru: “There is no one who can judge me.”

Echidna: “I will judge you. Me, who knows your sin, I will.” Subaru: “—There is no one who can validate me.”

Echidna: “If you cannot validate yourself, then allow me to invalidate the you you cannot forgive.” Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “If you will validate your sin, I will invalidate your sin.”

Every one of Subaru's words, Echidna persistently attempts to dispel. Why was the witch so insistently denying Subaru's sin?

Why was the witch so repeatedly trying to cast this darkness from Subaru's heart? Subaru: “Why, are you... trying so hard to do something for me?”

Echidna: "...Making a girl say this kind of thing is just slightly overly mean."

Echidna, who had not faltered even once until now, for the first time gets vague with her statements. With her face still tinted slightly red, Echidna coughs.

Echidna: "—Will you form a contract with me, Natsuki Subaru?" Quiet, but suggestive of strong volition.

Subaru blinks, letting the words sink into his brain, taking all the time necessary to comprehend. Subaru: "Con, tract...?"

Echidna: "Yes, a contract. A formal contract with the WITCH OF GREED. —Are you interested in tying one?"

Subaru: "We form this... say we formed this, what happens?"

Echidna: "It's simple. —From now on, whenever you run into an obstacle you can't surmount, I will ponder on the barricade together with you. Whenever you wish to hear someone's words, I will endeavour to give you the words you desire. Whenever your sins are close to crushing you, I will eliminate those crushing sins together with you."

Spoken all at once, a bashful smile rises on Echidna's face. Echidna: "Do you want to form this contract?"

Subaru: "...You're dead, and so, aren't you incapable of interfering with reality?"

Echidna: "I've probably transcended the capabilities of the dead. Call it belated and yes it's belated, but I don't think such a wrong. ...If you'll forgive it, that is."

Hand to her chest with her head hung, Echidna's words vibrate Subaru's eardrums. The vibration follows to his body, a heat steadily warming his blood as it transmits through his whole.

To his numbed fingers, sensation returns.

His arid tongue regains some moisture and mobility, his unblinking eyes filling with something hot to cast out the dryness.

This offered hand, proposition, proposal, assistance, has him lost on how to answer.

Echidna: “Not meaning to brag, but I'm confident about my information load. I can prepare counter-approaches for most all problems you'll encounter, and no matter how absurd a situation threatens to befall you, unlike your peers there is absolutely no necessity to toil in persuading me. And most of all, I can comprehend your RETURN BY DEATH.”

Subaru: “Are you hitting me with a surprise fast-lipped sales pitch?”

Echidna: “As the one seeking it, I do kinda think it natural to note out the benefits of tying a contract with me. If this has helped bring some ease into your heart at all, then perhaps you could call that another benefit.”

Taking advantage of Subaru's words, Echidna turns even them into part of her pitch. Seeing her acting in a way she never has before, Subaru's cheeks unwittingly loosen into a smile.

Feeling the air in his lungs peacefully exit, Subaru sighs.

With the meadow wind bathing the back of his neck, Subaru leans against the

chairback as he looks up at the sky.

In the artificial sky, he sees the white clouds floating.

Whenever he's stuck, whenever he's lost for answers, whenever he encounters hardship.

—If under this azure sky, he could once again trade words, seeking a solution... Subaru: “Maybe, it wouldn't be so bad...”

Echidna: “—Which would mean?”

The chair squeaking as she stands up, her hands unwittingly balled into fists, Echidna looks down at Subaru. With Subaru gazing at her while still leaned against his chairback, Echidna's face changes colour in embarrassment at what she just did.

Echidna: “Ah, um... right, if you mean you're desperate for it, then I guess that contract's something we could...”

Subaru: “Way too late for patching this up. Or actually, I'm not the one looking for this, it's you... no, in this situation, saying that is incredibly crude.”

Echidna is the one proposing it, but the entire thing is to save Subaru's heart.

Said plainly, it's a witch's kindness. That the whole affair won't take shape as Subaru simply clinging to that kindness is definitely because the witch is acting with consideration for Subaru.

No matter what he does, no matter who it is, is he always going to wind up getting saved?

With the rocking of the chairback pitching him forward as he uprights himself, Subaru stands up. Echidna stands within range to touch, looking up at the now-elevated Subaru, her expression uneasy.

This witch's minutest actions are cunning, he thinks.

Being that he is she is delivering him, he is unmistakably in no position to say anything. Subaru: “How do you tie a contract?”

Echidna: “—For tying a formal contract, you and I will be connected with a pass. I'll deal with attaching in the detailed itinerary... but for now, your palm.”

Echidna raises her right hand, facing her pale palm to Subaru. Like this, place your palm to mine, is probably what it means.

Seeing the witch standing opposite Subaru and her grin, unable to hide her happiness, Subaru feels a sort of dumbfoundment as he sighs.

Subaru: “Now, let's hope things're gonna start changing...”

Filled with more than a few expectations for the future, to Echidna's hand does Subaru place his—

BAM.

A shattering noise rips through the air as the white, cup-bearing table beside Subaru explodes. The impact which broke the table transmits on to the ground, the earth collapsing as it births a crater, the quakes and rumbling jolting Subaru violently as he squawks in surprise.

???: “—I'm putting a stop to this contract.”

Fist to the ground as she magnificently speaks is the blonde, blue-eyed girl.

—The WITCH OF WRATH glares at the two, in rage.

Chapter 75: They

Unwittingly stumbling back at the shock, Subaru's eyes open wide as he sees the blonde girl glaring at him. Her azure eyes brimming with incredible fury, a witch with crimson colouring her beautiful face—it's Minerva.

Bringing her sharp gaze off the paralysed Subaru, Minerva redirects to look at Echidna, standing opposite Subaru and entirely composed.

Minerva: “Repeating myself, but I'm putting a stop to this. I'm not acknowledging this contract.” Echidna: “...Hrm. This'd best be called a development outside what I anticipated.”

Too intimate for enmity, too bloodthirsty for anger. That emotional gaze concentrates wholeheartedly onto Echidna as Minerva crosses her arms inside the crater she made, hoisting up her abundant chest, biting her lip.

Echidna: “A witch's contract—you should be capable of understanding what significance these hold. That you've regardless interrupted us means... not possibly, you also want to tie a contract with him? Then here I suppose we'd be having a case of jealousy.”

Minerva: “Can't you at least tell that my anger is not for such a peaceful reason? I'm furious. I'm incensed. I'm vehement with boiling rage.”

The redness to Minerva's face intensifies as she replies to Echidna. Her peaking emotions turn into a teardrop at the corner of her eye, giving an innocent, childlike kind of obstinacy to her features.

Her young face is terribly mismatched to her voluptuous body—and her very

presence is something Subaru inevitably must accept, although with a great jumble of surprise.

Subaru: “Why're you here?”

Minerva: “What. Are you saying I'm not allowed to be?” Subaru: “Well no. I'm not, but... I mean, Echidna's right there.”

Says Subaru as he points at Echidna, Minerva puffing out her cheeks in displeasure. She tilts her head as if not understanding the problem here at all, but Echidna seems to catch on, giving a light clap of her hands as she nods.

Echidna: “Ah, I see what you're having a problem with. —You must be mystified as to how another witch has manifested, even though I'm present and standing right here.”

Subaru: “Th-that's it. I mean, every time I've met a witch up to now it's been one-on-one... like it was guaranteed they were appearing swapping out in your place. Didn't you...”

Minerva: “She never said we can't be out together, I bet. That kind of mean pointless trick is just how this nasty witch does things.”

Minerva angrily squares her shoulders as she easily destroys Subaru's objections. Subaru mutters a 'no way' to himself as he looks at Echidna. But Echidna gives no particular signs of refuting it.

Echidna: “I'd like you to not misunderstand, though. That I didn't call any other witches here is because it's a big responsibility and a big risk for me.

Depending on the circumstances, it's possible another witch will steal predominance over this place, and even if they don't it takes some considerable effort to recreate powerful beings such as them.”

Subaru: “And so then... but, no, you...”

Echidna: “I have never told a single lie. That alone, I will assert.”⁸

Echidna's sharp statement slices through Subaru's stuttering words.

She's right. Looking back through his memories, Echidna has never made any statement about this present phenomenon which could be deemed as a lie.

Subaru had just assumed that had been it. So speaking in extremes, Echidna technically had not deceived Subaru at all, but.

Echidna: “I didn't really want you to know that the other witches could manifest all over the place, and have them take you from me.”

Subaru: “Wh, aeh?”

Echidna: “You are truly the first guest in a long time for me. I haven't had conversations that thrilled me as much as ours so commonly whether before or after my death. Are you going to curse me, say that my desire to hog you is miserable?”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “I know I'm repeating this again and again, but I think of you fondly. And so I wanted to avoid it that, by the others having more allure, or by being a

more cooperative witch, your interest would shift away from me and toward them. —I don't mind if you laugh.”

It's a horrific, hideous desire to monopolize—is how Echidna is explaining the details behind her secrecy. Listening to Echinda's somewhat-excuse, with her fixation aimed right at him, he wonders: what about me that warrants this fixation?

The WITCH OF ENVY is the same case. Why was Echidna, too, with Subaru so —

5 With this line in mind, if Echidna has ever told anything construable as an outright lie in these summaries, assume it's because I bungled the nuance of what she was saying or otherwise didn't catch a double meaning. The same applies to Lewes and Garfiel.

Minerva: “You are just getting wheedled in so easily.” Subaru: “—Dhah!?”

A soft fist bumps the back of Subaru's head just as he goes to consider it.

He puts his hand to his head and turns around, to find Minerva behind him. She takes the hand he's pressing down on his head with, and with a flowing motion twists his arm to wrest him down to the ground.

Subaru: “A, auh! Wai, this hurts this hurts this hurts... or not?”

Minerva: “When I directly touch something living, no matter what action I take it turns into something restorative. I could punch with all my strength and it'll close wounds, I could wrestle someone while trying to wrench their limbs off and it'll cure their chronic diseases, and if I keep someone held in a lock their shoulder aches will disappear!”

Subaru: "A-and so that's why the aching over my body's... not."

While his body savours the incredible merit of the Witch of Wrath, Subaru frantically twists his neck to look at Minerva as she locks him in a hold.

Regardless of the fact that she's twisted him around in a way which should invite pain and jarring to his bones, he feels no ache but in fact a pleasant warmth spreading through his body, and consequently an incredible awriness. A mysterious authority which turns all acts preformed on a human body into something positive, and the witch exercising it. Certainly Subaru's had no negative impression of Minerva up to now, but...

Subaru: "What the hell're you trying to do here..."

Minerva: "I don't do this, and it looks like you're gonna get happily cajoled into contracting with Echidna. Your quick decisions and airhead attitude're really making me mad!"

Echidna: "Cajole, makes it sound bad. I'm sure I did explain the benefits of what a contract with me would be, and devise to put us on even grounds of mutual understanding..."

Minerva: "It's that attitude where you act like you totally followed through with your responsibility to explain here that's getting me. You did explain all about the benefits. You did... but, when it comes to the inconvenient stuff the contract'd cause, you didn't say a thing!"

Leaving herself to her rage, Minerva swings her leg down. Where her heel lands is Subaru's behind, and he gets to experience the incomprehensible

phenomenon of feeling a heel driving into his rear, as the force transmitted through his bottom bores an indentation into the ground.

Feeling some sense that the strike to his ass has improved his bowel functioning, Subaru realises the significance of what Minerva is saying, and is stunned.

—His conversation with Echidna had not touched on the detriments of the contract at all. And now he

understands the carelessness of his own self who had not even noticed the fact. Subaru: “No, but... saying detriments... something, that kind of serious...”

Minerva: “Wouldn't come up, is what you think? You're sure taking contracts lightly. Even though the contractor is a witch—and the one who of the seven sin witches tied the most contracts, had contact with the most people, who meddled the most in history, the WITCH OF GREED.”

Echidna: “All those laurels are laurels of my life... though it's true that not every one of them was what you'd call honourable. It's true that forming a contract with me did not necessarily save absolutely all of them.”

Minerva comes through with that fact Subaru was ignorant to. Echidna follows on from her, entirely stressing her absence of ill intentions toward Subaru.

Stuck between these two as they assert their stances, the turmoil in Subaru's head peaks. He didn't know which one to trust.

Ever since Subaru got involved with the Trial in this tomb, his multiple meetings and times spent deliberating over his worries together with Echidna have led him to consider her a kind of comrade in arms. And so when Echidna proposed to tie an organized collaboration in the form of this contract, Subaru had even felt a sense of security.

On the other hand, his time spent interacting and speaking with Minerva, compared to Echidna, is sparse. But whenever Subaru was in danger she would swoop in with her mighty arms to heal him, and without even demanding a 'thank you' zoom past like a typhoon, a merciful character.

Minerva had no reason to be deceiving Subaru, and if the matter was actually great enough that she would purposefully manifest to interject, there is probably more time to be spent mulling the whole thing over.

Or no, actually, rather than deliberating like this, what he should do was ask this question: Subaru: “Echidna. If we form the contract, you'll need compensation.”

Echidna: “...Yup, you're right. Contracts do need those. Like how I am offering my knowledge in response to your demand, you need to present compensation in response to my demand.”

Subaru: “Course. Yeah. —So, what're you demanding from me? If I contract you, what is it I need to offer you?”

For getting Echidna's help when stuck in a hopeless situation, what was it he needed to pay? Echidna's cheeks loosen into a smile.

Echidna: “It's nothing worth being wary over. What I'm demanding from you isn't anything so complex. Actually, for how I'm not trying to take anything precious physical or non-physical as compensation, you could even call this evenhanded.”

Subaru: “—Say, your, demand.”

Echidna: “It's very simple. —What you feel, what you create, what you know, what you do, what you think, what you retrospect, what fruits called UNKNOWNNS your presence incurs, I want to savour always.”

Says Echidna, her cheeks red and expression that of a young maiden with a crush. Fruits called UNKNOWNNS—Subaru furrows his brows at the poetic phrasing.

Subaru: “Hell's that. You mean, pull out my emotions and memories and recollections, and hand them over? If so then...”

Echidna: “Didn't I say? It's nothing so risky. I just want to witness the sights you see, the melodies you hear, the story you weave, all from a special box seat. All I want is to perceive this. I want to be in a position to know the UNKNOWNNS you create. By that and just merely that alone, I can be fulfilled.”

To dispel Subaru's concerns, Echidna plainly defines her demand.

She just wants to watch Subaru walk his path. See the same thing he sees. To know what he feels, what he knows, the results of his actions.

Thirst for knowledge incarnate, the Witch titled GREED, wanted merely that. Subaru: “You're, not lying right?”

Echidna: “Lying about contracts'd be absurd. While also for the sake of being myself, I pledge that I will never do anything to betray those words. I'd stake my life on it.”

Concludes Echidna with her hand to her chest, the joke being 'Though, I'm already dead.' Subaru senses no lies from her words or behaviour. Or perhaps he just wanted to believe that.

Subaru: “Minerva. This's what Echidna's telling me. And so what I'm doing is...”

???: “I-it's, all... true, but th... that doesn't, mean sh-she's... she's told you, everything.”

Subaru attempts to demand Minerva release him from the hold, when somebody new on the scene addresses him. This voice was one he had heard just a few quarter-hours ago—and spoken in a diction Subaru felt absolutely nothing positive for.

Subaru: “Camilla... the WITCH OF LUST!”

Camilla: “Do... d-don't, look at me with... with those scary, eyes. I, I'm not... not even, doing any... thing... you're, a-awful...”

Subaru: “The nasty eyes're inborn. I'm not making any specially harsh expression or anything.”

Subaru held grappled to the ground, with Echidna standing opposite him. Minerva behind him means the three form a straight line, with a pink-haired girl sitting in the meadow a short distance away—Camilla. She timidly hides her face away from Subaru's gaze, sporadically glancing over. The attitude's annoying as always, but by consciously averting his attention from her, Subaru manages to avoid CAPTIVATION TO THE POINT IT'S LIFE THREATENING.

Subaru: “But anyway, what were you talking bout? I'm not gonna complain this late about witches showing up, but if something's...”

Camilla: “E-Echidna-chan is... hiding, lots and lots... of, things. S-she isn't, lying but... she's hiding, lots... of things...”

Subaru: “Hiding things?”

Thinking over Camilla's words, Subaru imploringly looks to Echidna. Echidna closes an eye as she looks over at the suddenly-present Camilla.

Echidna: “Suddenly show up, and here you immediately come with the aspersions. Or more actually, how is it that he's stirred up your attentions? You're not like Minerva, you shouldn't have any reason to back him. You're supposed to have disliked him.”

Camilla: “A, r-rea... reason, like... Minerva-chan? No I, do... don't have any... proper, one. But, Echidna-chan, you... you, tricked... me, didn't you?”

Camilla looks down as she responds to Echidna's accurate statements, speaking in frail and stuttering voice. However, contrary to her diction, the actual words she is saying carry no weakness or compromise at all.

Camilla putters her fidgety gaze around, setting her glance multiple times on Echidna.

Camilla: “I-I, don't... like him, but, I... I'm not on your... side when you, tricked.... m-me Echidna-chan, ei... either. People who, t-trick me, hate... me, d-do mean, things to me... I WILL NEVER FORGIVE.”

—That last statement alone is spoken with incredible clarity.

So much that Subaru needs some time before he can recognize that it came from the mouth of this girl beside him. That was the extent that that single phrase diverted from Camilla's atmosphere up until now.

Camilla: “—”

Wordlessly, but assuredly without ever looking away, Camilla stares at Echidna.

In her eyes there churns a near indescribable whirlpool of emotions—something dark and grudgelike, entirely unforgiving of any bastard who would aim at her something resembling hostility.

Apex of narcissism—are the words that skim through Subaru's brain.

Echidna: “While it may've been a necessary measure, it seems acting in a way contrary to Camilla's desires was a mistake. Make an enemy of you, and there's no bigger nuisance out there.”

Camilla: “Eeveryone is, on my... side so, ha-having me... hate you, is, really... awful. Y-you can apol... apologize, but, I won't.... forgive you.”

Camilla's personality is introverted and timid enough that she cannot even communicate with others sufficiently—but that has nothing to do with the intensity of her rebellion toward hostility.

Subaru: “What've you all... what have you all been talking about!?”

And, butting in to the witches and their tense situation, Subaru finally speaks

up.

Feeling the attention of the three witches focusing on him, Subaru frantically turns his neck as he,

Subaru: “This's enough of you all talking while leaving me out! I'm the one who's choosing here! Say it in a way I can understand! Echidna, what're you hiding!? You two, what is it you know that's making you try to stop me!?”

Minerva: “Even saying that you're in a mentally frail position, stopping all thinking and immediately going to grasp an offered hand is totally naive... and what guided him into doing that was all of your so careful planning!”

Echidna: “A wound to my respectability. That sounds liable to make him misunderstand things. If we tie the contract, with my assistance I will lead him to, no matter what, reach the optimum destination that he desires. To know of the things he sees, sounds he hears, information he learns over this process is my demand. Not a single one of the things I am saying is fallacious.”

Minerva launches her words at the roaring Subaru with her voice shaking in rage. Echidna's composure remains entirely in place.

Feeling the coolness laced through Echidna's voice, Subaru also begins feeling something awry. Having transcended his up-until-now state of near delirium, he very deliberately scrutinizes over Echidna's words. Over her attitude, and over why the two witches are stopping him.

Was there something off? She wasn't saying anything off. The other two witches had acknowledged she wasn't lying. Then, where was the problem?

Echidna: “I will repeat it, Natsuki Subaru. Should you choose me, contract with me—I will, without fail, lead you to the place you desire.”

???: “—'Ultimately', is the disclaimer word guaranteed to come attached to this promise—haa.” Echidna makes her statement with her hand outstretched to Subaru, when a listless voice speaks.

He looks, to find a monster of magenta hair seated opposite Camilla—on the ground, buried in her long, long

hair, the WITCH OF SLOTH has appeared.

The multiplying in witches doesn't surprise Subaru any more. What Subaru does pick up is, Subaru: “Ultimately?”

Sekhmet: “I'm sure Echidna—hoo—is guaranteed to fulfil the contract—haa— But, so long as she upholds entirely the reality that—hoo—she did fulfil the contract—haa—she'll likely do whatever during the process to get there.”

Subaru: “Do, whatev...”

Linking together Sekhmet's words to the previous awriness he felt, one single hypothesis comes to Subaru's mind. But that hypothesis is one overwhelmingly hard to accept, and as Subaru's face stiffens in shock, he looks at Echidna and her closed eyes—and speaks.

Subaru: “Echidna, if I contract you... without fail, you will take me to the optimum future, you said.”

Echidna: “Yes, I did say that. And it's true. Without any doubt, I will carry out that contract to the end. With my knowledge and your attribute, we will assuredly be able to achieve it.”

Right, exactly, that was entirely the way of a completable contract.

Echidna's words present no lie. Should Subaru collaborate with her, they will be capable of unfailingly saving everything, and arriving to the future. However,

Subaru: "Will your cooperating in getting me to the optimum future—use the optimum path?" Echidna: "—"

Subaru: "For me to reach my desired destination, will you truly, help me the best you can?" Echidna: "—"

Subaru: "Why're you saying nothing. Answer me, Echidna—no—WITCH OF GREED!"

Raising his head, Subaru screams his throat hoarse.

While still held against the ground, and still stuck in a lock. But Subaru pays that fact no care as he wholeheartedly, undividedly, glares at Echidna. Faced with that sharp gaze, Echidna slips a small sigh.

Echidna: "—If it is to reach the optimum future, sacrifices along the way are permissible. Would this not have been what you resolved, Natsuki Subaru?"

Subaru: "—hk"

Echidna gives neither a directly positive nor negative response to Subaru's question. But, Subaru senses.

That Echidna's words were assuredly not any that would dispel his doubts.

Far from it, and as if to help him understand her thoughts, she spreads her arms wide.

Echidna:

“This attribute you have, RETURN BY DEATH, is an incredible authority. In the truest of meanings you cannot comprehend its utility. Not permitting the ends contrary to your desires, conducting countless redos, reaching for the future countless times—for a researcher, this is near the ultimate ideal. I

mean, wouldn't it be? The result of any event will fundamentally, once a single result has been reached, remain put. If you are still midway through the process of reaching a result, you can make varied hypotheses as to what the result will be. If using this approach, or otherwise if using these conditions, varied hypotheses and varied investigations are possible. But, if you are to experiment with the purpose of producing a result, then the results, testable hypotheses, and investigations will inevitably subsume into a single aggregate. Recreating completely, and I mean completely identical conditions is impossible. No matter what conditions you arrange, you cannot recreate the exact same conditions as you previously did. If you tried different methods back then, what result would you now procure? That question is one us researchers will never attain the answer for, nothing more than a dream existing in the forward path of what is ideal. For me and my MEMORIES OF THE WORLD, I indeed have means to KNOW the answer, I certainly do. Do, but I don't consider using that method, utilizing that method, as anything good. It's that I want TO KNOW, not TO HAVE KNOWN. The thing creates this terrible contradiction, for me you could call it abominable. But I'm getting off topic here so returning back to the point... right, we researches have to accept results as being entirely singular, and for us who possess only one means of observation, your existence, your authority, is something we desperately crave. You can run DIFFERING INVESTIGATIONS under IDENTICAL CONDITIONS, you can see SEPARATE RESULTS differing from the FUNDAMENTAL RESULT. That is the ultimate authority—how could you not want it? With this power right in front of you, how could you not test everything? Though of course, I have no intention to force you to do that. It is entirely that, for you achieving your own purposes, you will utilise RETURN BY DEATH a lot. And I will also devote my best so that we reach the future you desire. During that process, I would like to get your

extensive contribution to sating my curiosity. When that is all I'm asking I'm sure there's no punishment to be invoked. You will get to witness answers. I will get to sate my curiosity. Our mutual interests coincide. Since I don't know the answers either, there of course could be no instance where I purposefully lead you down an incorrect path, and you consequently meet a gruesome demise. I don't initially know the correct answer when faced with a problem, and in that sense I am entirely the same as you. In the sense of us puzzling over the same problems, struggling on, attempting to reach an answer together, I am sure you should call us unmistakably comrades. I can state that firmly and not with the slightest of embarrassment. I think very fondly of you, in the sense that you give me more methods for preforming investigation, and so I pledge that I would never do anything that would be improper consideration of you. But of course, I'm sure we will naturally encounter problems where even with my assistance, easy surmountation of the problem will be impossible. While I may be able to assist you as a font of knowledge, that doesn't mean I can at all interfere with reality. Should we face a physical obstacle blocking your path, that sort of problem where force is necessary, I will not be able to help you.

Times upon times, potentially even hundreds or thousands of times, your mind and body may be broken. But even should that hypothetically happen, I would sincerely wish to preform your mental care. That that desire is without any intermingling from my researcher's interest to not part with something useful is not something I can assert. But that said, it is entirely truth that I think of you and your existence fondly, and that I want to aid you. I don't want you to think badly of me. And I know I'm repeating myself, but I can say with pride that I am a presence useful for achieving your goals. Yes, just as I am considering in a sense to utilize you for the purpose of sating my greed called curiosity, you can likewise utilize me for your goal of REACHING THE OPTIMUM FUTURE. To be that kind of overly convenient girl you can take advantage of, for me, is entire satisfaction. If doing so will motivate you, then I will gladly submit my being to you. Although the question of whether you're interested in this deceased and impoverished body would have to be be another topic. Oop, saying that might've been a foul against your loves. Your loves—the silver half-elf, and the blue-haired oni girl. The girls you will save no matter what, who you will stringently protect, having from your heart pledged to do so and through your

actions exhibited that volition. Putting my thoughts on the state of your heart and the way it harbours such strong emotion for two girls aside as something I will not state here, I will assert that the height of the walls you must scale will be beyond imagination. How many unmanagable obstacles do you have lined up before you in present reality just that you know of? Your resolve to try and surmount these problems by yourself is honourable, and incredibly tragic. I want to be your aid on this path, with my hopes to be that aid not being anything fabricated in the least. You should definitely utilize these desires of mine. You need to take everything you can possibly have, use everything that you can possibly utilize, and by doing entirely that save the people with which you have bonds. That is the firm conviction you yourself had pledged, which you have fully understood as being a necessary and painful path. And so I will question you, I will repeat with you, I will have feelings for you. The path you walk by throwing away your life is something that ironically only just got certified in the form of the second TRIAL. With how you could almost mistake that TRIAL as having been there to make you comprehend what it is this path you have walked, you could perhaps even think the thing necessary. Of course the reality is it wasn't necessary, and it was the kind of experience which damaged your mind. But if it's between a state of not knowing and a state of yes knowing, no matter how grievous a truth it is, I'd consider the latter more valuable. Up until now, and also from now on, you will need you present your life as compensation for RETURN BY DEATH, and in doing so wrest in the future. That there are perhaps people who've been sacrificed for this purpose, and that these worlds in this fashion PERHAPS MIGHT EXIST was something necessary for you to have put in mind.

Someday, you'll cease to feel any emotion when it comes to paying with your life, your human emotions will wane, you'll cease to be rattled by the DEATHS of those precious to you, you'll submerge into a life of impassive, indifferent inertia, and even should you reach the optimum future, you will be reaching it as an impaired version of yourself—for the sake of avoiding this kind of future, where the only thing that remains is a feeling of vain, it was necessary. No, there is not a single worthless thing in the world, everything is a necessary route taken, a needed piece to the puzzle. The TRIAL was necessary for you to comprehend that. If you require a tenable rationalization and pretext as to why

you have hit a standstill, then adopt this stance. And I will validate that stance of yours. If my words can give you the strength you need to continue forward, then my words will I give to you. Whether they be comforts, tough motivators, whispers of love, provokers of loathing, if they will give you assistance then without any hesitation will I exercise them for you. And although you might detest it, you unconditionally need the assistance of someone like me on your path forward. If you're to proceed along a road of unavoidable pain and solitude, you absolutely need someone to walk alongside you without ever taking their eyes from the path.

And if the person we're talking about to fill that role is me, not anyone else, but me, then I can walk that road alongside you without any problem at all. I will repeat it, I will restate it, I will convey it countless times until it reaches you. —You must need me. And I absolutely need you. Your presence is essential. My curiosity simply cannot be fulfilled without you. You are the only being which can sate me. You, you will surely grant me the quenching of my unquenchable GREED. Your presence is already indispensable for me as I dwell in this closed world. If you should wish to be somebody's hope, to execute your power to clear the world open, could my piteous self perhaps not partake in your leftovers? If you could concentrate any of that great kindness unto me, then I'd hesitate not a second to devote to you my being, my knowledge, my soul. I'm begging you. I want you to trust me. That I hadn't attempted to communicate you my true motives was assuredly no attempt to deceive you, nor any attempt to hide it from you. It was just a matter of choosing the right time. If here, at this instant I appealed with a fragment of my true intention, you surely would've left me. That would be an unbearable loss for me. And of course for you also, in the sense of distancing yourself from the future you seek, it undoubtedly should be regarded as a definite loss as well. Someday, being that you have your attribute of RETURN BY DEATH, you will surely reach the future you seek. But, it's obviously best that the compensation you pay in reaching that future be little. If it's me, when it's me, a greater sparsity is possible in that compensation. Everything goes so long as ultimately you reach the desired future—and such kind of inhuman thinking, ignoring the small goals for the large ones, is what I'd prefer you not mistake this for. Being caught by a temptation, and so desiring to view the outcome of some certain situation, I

may notice something necessary for reaching the optimum track but not mention it—is the kind of action I absolutely would not do, is not how great a check I have on my cravings to be able to plainly assert. I will acknowledge that. But, I will not deceive you. If hypothetically we assume that I do dip my hands into some trust-betraying deed like that, I would under no circumstances do anything to keep it hidden from you. I would absolutely reveal it to you. And I would devote everything I have to you to make up for that damaged trust. No matter what happens, I will assuredly send you off to your desired optimum future. Absolutely, unconditionally. And so having rationalized this clearly as a necessary measure, won't you choose me? Once the contract is made, I will follow along exactly exactly as your desires and demands there state. After that comes the conversation of just how much you can devote yourself to your wish, your wanted wish, your desired wish. My resolve is just as I stated. Now is to hear what is your resolve. I want you to prove to me that you, having formed a contract with me and acquired my collaboration, have the mettle to without fail reach the future. Once you accomplish so then for the first time, you may boast that you bested the second TRIAL. And from there proceed to the third TRIAL, overcome it, and complete the liberation of SANCTUARY. When you consider the calamity to befall your loves and those precious to you, this is indeed exactly a TRIAL you must surmount. I want you to show me that you have the strength, the resolve to overcome it. And from there you will plunder me, utilize my knowledge, and procure what lies ahead. What I desire of you, demand of you, and can offer you in return is there at a full stop. I sincerely, honestly, willed here to reveal you everything. And so now with everything stated what is it you will decide? —That answer is what I'd like you to tell me. For the sake of sating a fragment of my curiosity too, of course.”

—Says Echidna, smiling sweetly.

Her snow-white hair sways and her cheeks redden slightly in fervour as she peers up at Subaru, waiting for his answer.

Her eyelashes tremble with trepidation for his reaction, the fingers anxiously held to her chest fidgeting about. Her lips make many attempts to say

something, but she hesitates, and the action ends merely with a wetting by her tongue.

Subaru looks up. He meets eyes with Minerva, restraining him.

Having locked gazes with Subaru, Minerva gives a small sigh as she finally releases Subaru's arm. His shoulder escapes from the restraints, freed, as Subaru rolls his arms and stands up.

Just as Minerva said, the aching in his shoulders is gone. In fact, he even senses keenly that his somewhat taut hips and other places have been purged of their fatigue. The authority of the WITCH OF WRATH truly was healing to be feared.

Subaru: “—”

Rotating all of his body about, Subaru confirms his bodily sensation as he puts his thoughts in order. About what he had only just heard, no hiding anything at all, Echidna's truest of true intentions.

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “Yes?”

Subaru: “You're... going to use me?”

He is going to be used. That was the term Echidna had repeated, again and again, throughout what she just said. Hearing that, Echidna nods without hesitation.

Echidna: “I am. And you can use me too. The contract would be something of a precaution, to ensure neither of us stray from that principle. If you're going to criticise me for attempting to use anything I could to keep you, I will resignedly accept it.”

Subaru: “I didn't consider anything, 's actually not the case. I at least understand that, said in extremes, this's just what you get with pro-con interest-sake relationships. That you'd help me 100% off your goodwill... though I hoped for it, I was at least prepared to the accept the reality that you wouldn't. But.”

Standing before Echidna, Subaru buries his face in his hands, facing upwards.
Subaru: “It just, wasn't there...”

Echidna: “It, being?”

Subaru: “Every single one of your actions up to now, looks faded to me. Everything of your friendly interactions with me, which started me trusting that maybe you weren't a bad guy after all... all of it, is faded.”

Everything from their first meeting to this very moment thuds to a collapse, crumbling.

Their first tea party, the scene during the Trial, interrupted by reality, when he countless times he clung to her wisdom, her words. When he thought he could not regret forming a contract with her.

—Everything from that time heartlessly laughs its ridicule at the foolishness of Natsuki Subaru. Subaru: “Was this your intention all along?”

Echidna: “I don't really understand what you have a problem with. If it means that ultimately you'll reach the optimum, you'll rationalize the path you used to get there—didn't you decide this? You yourself validated that thought, and I'm sure I pushed you along saying that was okay...”

Subaru: “And for me to rationalize like that... not that I have but, you're saying that inducing me to go along that trend... was entirely according to your plan, then?”

Echidna: “I'd prefer you not misunderstand. That conclusion is entirely one that you had produced

yourself. All I did was give your conclusion just a tiny, slight prodding. That you're desiring for the responsibility behind your own words and conclusion to lie in someone else is indeed not impressive. Not impressive, and I'm not so simple as to bear it for you.”

Protests Echidna, her expression pouting and sulky. The childishness she's expressing here, or more rather how out-of-place it is, makes the awriness Subaru has been feeling compound further.

What to call it—a misfit in degree of emotion.

The way Echidna expresses emotion is not incorrect. She's indignant when she is doubted, she smiles when there's something to be happy about, grief slips through in her face in response to sad things. That is all correct, and not mistaken.

But still, this awriness, and the distrust it produces. The solution— Subaru: “All your behaviour feels synthetic, it is superficial.” Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “When you're joyed, even when you're angry, the way you express emotion is childish and shallow. I mean right now, far from being enraged all you did was pout. Broad-minded, or whatever isn't the problem here. That behaviour... all your behaviour's been weird. I just thought you were brash and easily accepted, easy to get along with, but...”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “You're actually not. You—You are someone who can't understand others' emotions.” Recollect back on all of Echidna's behaviour thus far, and everything tones in sepia.

Every attitude of hers that he had found appealing was a boon of her shallow emotional expression

—wind up perceiving it as such, and all of their interactions fade of colour.

And although showered in these unsparing words, Echidna's expression remains unchanged from that previous pout. As if she knew no way to express any greater discomfort.

Subaru: “You're allowed to be angry here.”

Echidna: “...I see. So here I should raise my voice, and shower you with curses. Understood, that was useful. Supposing another chance comes, let's see I do that.”

Echidna's expression vanishes.

Expressionless—something Subaru had never seen of the Echidna he knew, the first-time-seen visage of the WITCH OF GREED.

Echidna: “Want to sit? I'd like us to iron out the details about the contract.”

Subaru: “...In this situation, do you think I'll still readily consider a contract with you?”

Echidna: “No way, you're rejecting me over a little disagreement in opinion?”

What on earth is the meaning in doing that? Having your emotions temporarily overwhelm you, and so failing to take the correct choice can't be called wise. I recommend looking at reality, and electing for rational thought.”9

At Echidna's words dead of emotion, Subaru closes his eyes and holds his breath.

What Echidna's saying is correct. Subaru is the one losing his temper—would be irrefutable if said. It made logical sense. She was not lying.

All Echidna did was hide her true intentions from Subaru. All she did was keep silent on mentioning the benefits she acquired from the course of Subaru's ventures.

Should they tie the contract, most likely, Subaru would reach the correct path. Echidna's lack of frugality in providing this cooperation would also be unmistakable truth.

Subaru: “There's one thing I wanted you ask you when I next saw you.”
Echidna: “—Hrm, now what could it be?”

Subaru: “Once I hear this question's answer, I'll know if I can choose.”

Echidna waits to hear Subaru's question.

This was a question Subaru was bringing up as a touchstone. A question to which Subaru yet saw not a single scrap of the answer for, which Echidna certainly had some relation to.

Subaru: “—You know about Beatrice, Echidna.”

Echidna: “...Yes, I do. Since I was deeply involved over the process of her creation. Did something happen with her?”

Echidna replies without ill will. Her answer lacks any hidden implication, and comes loaded with questions.

Subaru closes his eyes, envisions the young pigtailed girl.

The last Subaru had seen of her, she had been stabbed from behind, disappearing.

Her long, long time spent in isolation and the darkness it had spawned—his collision with this just prior her disappearance had remained constant and heavy in his heart.

Pushing Subaru aside, protecting him from the blades, the expression on her face in that final instant

—that was still burned inescapably into his memory. And so,

Subaru: “Beatrice has, because of the contract, always been waiting for THEY. Are you who tied that contract? Are you who bound her to the mansion?”

Echidna: “I don't remember specifying a location, but... the one who arranged for her to guard the Forbidden Archive and wait until their coming was indeed me.”

Subaru: “Then, who is THEY? What can I do to free her?”

Through her 400 years of solitude, Beatrice had constantly been waiting for SOMEONE. Not even Beatrice herself knew who that SOMEONE was. Neither did Subaru have any clue.

But if he asked for the answer from Echidna herself, who had arranged this appointment with that SOMEONE—

6 Echidna's pronoun reverts from 'boku' to her usual 'watashi'.

Echidna: “Now, I really wonder who?” Subaru: “—Wh, ah?”

Echidna: “No, I'm not even joking or anything, I truly, sincerely wonder. Who do you think the

THEY Beatrice is waiting for is?”

Asks Echidna, as if she has been presented with a question she does not know the answer to. Stunned, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “Even you don't know who it is Beatrice is waiting for?”

Echidna: “Nope, I don't. I do not know who the THEY Beatrice is waiting for is.”

Subaru: “Wh, y? But, you're the one who told Beatrice to wait in the Forbidden Archive, aren't you? If you don't know... no way.”

Echidna, who instructed Beatrice to wait in the Forbidden Archive, was someone separate from who imposed the time limit that she wait until THEY's visit.

If so, the one who would know the solution would again be somewhere else—
Echidna: “Wrong, you're mistaken.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “The one who instructed Beatrice to wait for THEY was me. There's no mistake in that. Where you are mistaken is in a more fundamental area.”

Subaru: “Fundamental?”

Echidna: “Now just why in the world did I tie that contract with Beatrice? That is where you're misunderstanding. I had Beatrice guard over the Forbidden Archive so that she could give its contents over to THEY, would be what you're thinking, right?”

Subaru doesn't see what she's getting at.

It's just a natural thought. Giving instructions to hand something over to someone. But, at Subaru and his entirely ordinary thoughts, Echidna shakes her head.

Echidna: “That wasn't my instruction to Beatrice. I tied her to contract, making her wait for THEY... while waiting for the result of just who she would choose as THEY.”

Subaru: “—”

—.

——.

————.

—————what?

Echidna: “You see, she was created for a specific purpose. But necessity came up for her to stay alive in a fashion differing from her original objective... and for that sake she was distanced from here, where she then needed to be given a

goal. It's in the sense of giving that hollow, empty girl a purpose for living, but yes it's necessary. And so I tied a contract with her.”

Subaru: “—Th, at.”

Echidna: “Preservation of the Forbidden Archive, and its complete transference to the eventually-coming THEY. There's no limitations. Although, that's because they're conditions with no correct solution. She stays alive just as planned, and I can look into the solutions for other research. Don't you find it very logical?”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “Naturally, going four hundred years without choosing anyone is yet another result. As is her not easily choosing THEY from any of those she met through her days. Potentially even her deliberating over whether to violate the contract, and desiring her own DEATH, is yet another result.”

Subaru: “What, do you think of that?” Echidna: “—? I think it's wonderful.”

Says Echidna, tilting her head, as if she had just been asked a question with an incredibly obvious answer.

Echidna's answer, her attitude, and the expression of the girl arisen in Subaru's mind, lead him to the solution.

Got it. Decided. Clearly understood.

—His miscomprehension about just who, here, he was dealing with, is rectified. Subaru: “Echidna... you are a witch.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: "An indecipherable, unfathomable aberration." Echidna: "—"

He communicates it. The answer, he had in his heart.

He pulls back his arm, and as to who he would reach out to, this time he truly decided. Subaru: "I... I can't take your hand. I've already decided whose hand it is I'm taking."

Echidna: "—"

Subaru: "Done without malice, done without ill will, there is a girl whose four hundred years your binding words pilfered. —Decided. I am taking that girl's hand. I can't go with you."

He announces their farewell.

He shakes away the hand of the one he had once thought to walk alongside him.

Subaru raises his head. Looks forward.

Beneath his eyelids, the final expression from that girl arises.

—Face twisted in fear of disappearing and dying, near crying, but nevertheless with relief in her eyes that Subaru had been protected.

To take the hand of the girl who mourned for his DEATH is what Subaru decides. Echidna: "—"

Echidna's eyes narrow.

A look of cogitation flashes through her eyes, her intent being to fling some sort of words at Subaru's decision.

But, before she can, the change occurs. Minerva: “—She's here.”

Camilla: “Oh, no, I... I've... got noth... nothing to do, with this... any more.”

Sekhmet: “At a troublesome spot, a troublesome person, is here to cause some trouble—haa.” The three witches all give their respective reactions.

And, overwhelming pressure from behind him.

Echidna's eyes, seeing what is behind Subaru, lightly snap open. Following her surprise, Subaru turns around, and sees it.

???: “—”

With pitch-black darkness cloaking everything from the neck up, there stood the WITCH OF ENVY.

Chapter 76: #Satella

—This was the first time Subaru had ever met face-to-face with the WITCH herself.

Witch of Envy—it was a name he had heard countless times, and the threat she presented was something he had confronted himself during the dusky loop in SANCTUARY.

His defiance of the rules she had imposed on him had earned him more than one or two experiences of heart-crushing pain. To harbour a positive impression of this witch, who had overtaken Emilia's body and destroyed SANCTUARY, was indeed difficult.

And especially so after his last conversation with Echidna, which had unwittingly spawned in him an aversion to the very word WITCH. But,

Subaru: “Yeah... the other witches don't compare.”

Faced with the pressure exerted by the witch standing before him, Subaru mutters in hoarse voice.

She's a thin woman.

Her arms dangle loosely as she stands without vigour, apparently looking at Subaru. An ebon dress —sewn from shadows arising underfoot—garbs her, its flesh pulsating almost as if in rhythm with her heartbeat.

From wrists forward of the long sleeves of her dress Subaru sees her strangely pale fingers, and manages to estimate that the WITCH OF ENVY, like the other witches, possesses a countenance of more than according beauty.

But, to confirm that, the most vital piece of information is missing. Subaru: “Seen it a bunch of times now, but... what's the deal with this?”

A sable shadow cloaks everything from the witch's neck up, making visual confirmation impossible. Unlike the ebon dress robing her body, this shadow wavers like mist, concealing the WITCH OF ENVY's visage from Subaru.

Subaru's question is somewhat taken aback. But the witch gives no reaction.

A sense of peaking, impatient panic burns at Subaru's chest as sweat arises on his brow—when he glances over the area, spying the other four witches in silence.

Subaru: “—”

Seeing the changes in their expressions, Subaru feels a surprise.

Going by Subaru's knowledge, the relationship between them and the WITCH OF ENVY is the one of murder victim and assailant. Meeting their own killer. Subaru did have an idea of what mental burden that would bring.

But, all of the witches' expression differ from Subaru's predictions.

One is a gentle smile, one is gaze of commiserating pity, one is an indifference suggesting absolute lack of concern, and the last one is—

Echidna: “So you cut through my boundary and managed to get in. Brazenly trespassing even into my dream castle... always the egotist, aren't you.”

Only one person, the Witch of Greed Echidna, glares with hostility in their eyes.

Seeing loathing, or something close to it, coming from no other but Echidna

surprises Subaru. He had only just voice their final parting, thinking that she lacked such emotions. Seeing her blatantly exhibiting emotion, Subaru begins doubting and wondering if perhaps he was wrong.

But time to realistically flag that as a problem has passed.

Right now, the problem is how to deal with this motionless witch in front of him.

Subaru: "Why is she even here in the fir..."

Minerva: "I'm sure she's mad 'cause you went gossiping on and on saying stuff you shouldn't. Blabbermouth men like that are ones I don't think very highly of. I kinda get her indignation."

Subaru: "Tell me that but I don't get it. Or actually, you're taking her side? From you and the other witches' perspective she's meant to be your foe."

Minerva: "My foe, is such a stupid-sounding thing to hear. ...I'm going to be checking now if what you're saying's valid."

Narrowing her eyes, Minerva's blonde hair sways as she moves to action.

She cuts into the Witch of Envy's line of sight, interrupting her wholehearted staring at Subaru.

Minerva pushes out her voluptuous chest as she boldly faces the witch. And,

Minerva: "Can you hear this? It's me, Minerva. The WITCH OF WRATH Minerva. If you remember me, and can hear my voice, say something."

Subaru: “—! No, wait! Far as my knowledge goes conversation doesn't work on her! If you do anything else which'd provoke her...” Sekhmet: “Try to keep quiet—haa.”

Subaru can only perceive Minerva's speech as reckless. But it is words from Sekhmet, still existing as a hairball on the ground, which stop him.

Subaru glances back at her. She stirs, the magenta hairball shifting in size.

Sekhmet: “The time we've spent together with that is—huu—multitudes greater than what your short interactions have been—haa. Your trepidation is natural, but—huu—try leaving this one to Minerva —haa. Thoughtless actions are... indeed what she does sometimes—huu—but this time I suppose she's probably not acting without thinking—haa.”

Minerva: “I can hear you, Sekhmet! If you don't want me to mess up the talk and for all of us to get swallowed, don't say things that'll make me mad! I am teeming with furious ire!”

Sekhmet: “When talking about you—huu—who'll use someone breathing in your vicinity as a reason to anger—haa—that's quite a pickle—huu.”

Even while getting hit with this ruthless opinion, Minerva averts her attention from the threat before her not at all.

That little back-and-forth should have spurred some kind of action from the WITCH OF ENVY. But she stands there doing nothing as she merely stares through the WITCH OF WRATH, and at Subaru.

Indeed, you could perhaps say there is a definitive departure from the split-second practical reactions the Witch has given up until now.

But all that meant was that she hadn't immediately taken hostile action.

Whether or not a conversation would come to be still seemed another matter.

Sekhmet was leaving the entirety of the dialogue up to Minerva. Then, the other two—

Camilla: “We... well, I think... t-think, it's fine if... Minerva-chan's going to, to try... her best to, do it. But if s-she... umm... mm, she gets Minerva-chan... I-I'll kill, her.”

Echidna: “That's a dependable-sounding statement, but I'm sure I've told you countless times that your affinity with that thing is abhorrent. If there's anyone here who can resist it, it's only Sekhmet.

—You do understand?”

Echidna endeavours to keep her voice calm as she chides the stuttering-but-belligerent Camilla. The

white-haired witch glances at Sekhmet, who trembles as if replying at all is a nuisance.

Sekhmet: “It won't be possible for me to continuously seal its movements.” You should know that power-wise it's not suited to that.

Echidna: “Indeed I know. And so you just have to pulverise its limbs and throttle its neck. If you

physically seal its movements and choke it, I can have it expunged from this space.”

Echidna projects enough fierce hostility to make Camilla's statements look

cute. And although she says it with an aloofness, the utter disgust seeping into her words makes what what she's saying sound like nothing joking.

With this livewire conversation going on in the background, Minerva continues to face the WITCH OF ENVY. In fact, as if trying to keep the WITCH OF ENVY from hearing the other witches' back-and-forth, she takes a step closer.

Minerva: “—”

Subaru swallows his breath as he watches Minerva's advance.

All Subaru can consider Minerva's actions is reckless—but he can't even tell for what purpose the

WITCH OF ENVY materialized here in the first place.

If this accords with the previous cases, then the reason for her showing up would be because Subaru violated the taboo. But the abuses the witch has done so far in response to the violated taboo have entirely been materializing arms to squeeze Subaru's heart, and materializing in physical reality to swallow everything in shadow.

Friendly interactions were an of course not, but the WITCH OF ENVY hasn't even really expressed what her intentions are. Her goals yet remain completely unapparent.

The question of how the Witch will respond to Minerva is thus an absolute unknown to Subaru.

—If Minerva is swallowed by shadows, the other three will move instantly.

If the hopes Echidna's put on Sehkmet are sound, then the WITCH OF SLOTH will use her authority to pulverise the WITCH OF ENVY, and Echidna can expel

the weakened WITCH OF ENVY.

But, if that's the case—

Why weren't they immediately doing it now? Subaru: “—”

Call things strange, and this situation where Minerva's been tasked with first contact with the WITCH OF ENVY in itself is already strange.

Camilla's ready to attack if anything happens, Sekhmet doesn't want proactive hostility, and even enmity-laden Echidna is taking no preparations for pre-emptive attack that would run counter to Minerva's desires.

Just what on earth were they all—

Echidna: “You look like you can't comprehend us witches' intentions and are being tossed around

and toyed with.” Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “Although, believing that you could easily see through to our... oop, I mean our thoughts would be a discredit to the name of witch. On that you can't take us so cheaply.” 10

Subaru: “Stop it with the fake bokukko. —All I'm thinking is if you seriously want to distance the WITCH OF ENVY, here where she's defenseless's your best chance.”

Echidna: “I see. So that's how you perceive this situation. Goodness... well, right. Personally, I'm all for full agreement with your stance. What I'd really like to do about now is bash that thing with every authority I could have, annihilating it without leaving a speck of dust behind, but...”

Cutting off there, Echidna narrows her eyes.

This attitude isn't like her—that said, as if he really knew her at all—but, sensing a kind of shame which is rather not like her, Subaru waits for her to speak.

After a short silence, Echidna does.

Echidna: “Doing everything I can to eradicate that thing, and then having the other witches turn on me is cart before horse. Nevermind Minerva, if we're talking a bet which'll make enemies of Sekhmet and Typhon, there's little worth gambling.”

Subaru: “I'm not getting it. Why would trying to eradicate the WITCH OF ENVY make you enemies?”

She's your foe, that's something everyone's agreeing...”

Camilla: “You're, wr... wrong.”

Camilla, who had kept silent up until now, is the one to butt in on Subaru's question. She goes without looking at Subaru as he startles, instead watching Minerva's confrontation with the WITCH OF ENVY.

7 Echidna switches her pronoun from watashi (first our) to boku (second our) for the rest of the chapter.

Camilla: “That ENVY is... is, eeveryone's foe, is... is right, but, t-that... thing and her, are... d—

different, cases... mm?”

Subaru: “...I don't understand what you're saying. What're all of you...”

Sekhmet: “So long as we don't know which one that thing standing there is—
huh—more than us being unwilling to act, to do so'd be unreasonable—hah.”

Subaru: “Which one?”

Sekhmet gives a reply. But even that only throws Subaru into further disarray.
What on earth were

they all talking about? —When, the solution arrives from a different angle.

Taking another step, Minerva further closes distance on the WITCH OF ENVY.

She spreads her arms wide, showing a posture of non-resistance, and says to
the WITCH OF ENVY: Minerva: “—Are you the WITCH OF ENVY? Or are you
Satella? Which?”

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Subaru senses he has just heard something that flips everything he has known
on its head.

What Minerva just said hugely differs from the truth Subaru knows. But that
Minerva's statement is no random bluster or empty joke is validated by the
wordlessness of the other witches, who had lived in their same generation.

For the first time, the WITCH OF ENVY's shoulders tremble. The black mist
concealing her head squirms. It seems she has turned her body to face Minerva.

—This is the very first moment that the Witch becomes conscious of Minerva.

Subaru: “—”

What did that statement mean? Is not a question Subaru is given any opening to ask. And more importantly, the taut and overwhelming tension swiftly parches his throat dry.

And with the witches affirming it, that only makes the utter contradiction of his beliefs worse.

—WITCH OF ENVY Satella. The character so called this—may in fact be someone else. No. That was thinking way too far off too little data.

How many times had he had terrible experiences because he made decisions based off of only superficial information, and kept stubborn with them? Even if he is constantly considering the possibility, he must not get irrevocably attached to the idea.

And more importantly, he best not divert his attention from the scene in front of him for even a second.

Minerva: “If you're not suddenly attacking at the first question... then it means there's still a chance.”

Says Minerva, as she closes further distance.

The distance remaining between the WITCH OF WRATH and the Witch is five steps.

Minerva: “Though if you were the WITCH OF ENVY, it wouldn't be weird for you to instantly strike with BEGRUDGE the moment I stood in his path, so I wasn't really worried about that.”

Four steps.

Minerva: “But then it would've been fine for you to say something right at the

start. I know it's hard to have this face-to-face with our relationship. There's no way anyone could forget what my last expression when you swallowed me was.”

Three steps.

Minerva: “Though, I think it's way better that it's me than the other five. Nevermind Typhon, outside

of her, I was... your closest friend, is what I thought.” Two steps. Head bowed.

Minerva: “Is, what I thought... and because I did, it's...!”

Crouches down. Two steps away, Minerva leans forward, puts her strength in her back leg.

And,

Minerva: “Do you understand how being ignored feels, when it's been so long —!?” The ground explodes as the single rush obliterates the two steps of distance.

Minerva charges forward with dust clouds in her wake, twisting her body for a full-force punch pistoned back from the shoulder. Her fist drills through the air, breaking the sound barrier, booming toward the Witch's head. The attack zooms for her shadow-cloaked visage and—

Minerva: “—See, knew it.”

Minerva's fist miraculously stops just before contacting the Witch's face.

That's not to say that the Witch's shadows stretched out, and entangled her arm. Minerva, of her own volition, stopped her arm before it would reach.

Still with her fist brandished in the Witch's face, Minerva leans back upright

with her blonde hair swaying.

Minerva: “See, look. She knew there wasn't any need to dodge my punch, that's Satella, not the WITCH OF ENVY. Echidna, your caution's pointless.”

Echidna: “...I wonder. I will honestly praise your pluck in staking your own body in an attempt to confirm this, but these stories are disparate. If it's simply discerned that your presence is no great threat, obviously it wouldn't act. And so, Sekhmet.”

Sekhmet: “Trying any reason possible to get me to act—huu. You're the same way in being terrible at determining when to quit, Echidna—haa. Accept it, that's Satella—huu.”

Sekhmet sighs at the stumped Echidna.

Continuing unchanged as a ball of hair, the witches' ultimate weapon shows no signs of acting. Close enough for their hands to touch and facing the Witch—facing Satella, Minerva turns back to Subaru.

With her azure eyes staring at him, and still unable to really accept the reality that she was standing directly beside a huge threat, all Subaru can do is dumbly stand there.

Minerva snorts at him, her expression dissatisfied.

Minerva: “What're you spacing out about. Come on, get over here.” Subaru: “Get over here... you can say that, but...”

Minerva: “What, you're not a man at all. I've proven that it's all okay, so shouldn't you come striding over as well? No? Then all this table-setting I've done still isn't enough? If you're saying you won't cross the stone bridge even if

someone taps it for you, how're you ever gonna lose your caution enough to cross it!”

Subaru: “Stop getting yourself heated up! It's not that I'm not going there 'cause I'm freaking out! I'm not going there because I don't know why I should!”

Yelling back at an indignant Minerva in the same tone of voice, Subaru objects to this situation of being left in the lurch.

Pointing at Satella, who is no longer an immediate threat, Subaru looks over the witches as they relax from combat posture.

Subaru: “And actually, what does the WITCH OF ENVY and Satella being separate even mean! You're talking about it like it's obvious, but this's already diverged well from what my understanding was!”

Echidna: “Wholly. If you forcibly introduce a witch factor into a being with no affinity, you do get these afflictions. The witch personality that spawns from the factor's influence, and the original self conflict... is perhaps what to call it. Though, my view is they're the same being, so I can't really see the point in differentiating them like the others do.”

Subaru: “Split, personalities!? Then, what? The one who swallowed all you and did the wrongs to get her lasting in history was one personality, and the other personality's harmless, is what you're...”

Echidna: “Now that's wrong.”

Subaru attempts to deal with it alongside his surprise at this information, but Echidna stops him. She shakes her head, and amending Subaru's theory,

Echidna: “The consuming of half the world, and the consuming of us six witches of sin, was entirely by SATELLA's actions, not the WITCH OF ENVY.”

Subaru: “Wh—!? No, but that doesn't make any sense! If the one who swallowed you was Satella, and that's Satella standing over there... this...”

Sekhmet: “It does fit. And so—haa—we won't forgive the WITCH OF ENVY—huu—but we have no grudge against Satella—haa. That's all it is—huu.

Camilla: “I-I, do... don't like, S-Satella-chan... ei... either, but I... guess she's, bet... better than, the Witch... so...”

Sekhmet and Camilla give their agreement in a way which only makes Subaru's questions multiply. The witches appear to have general consensus, but Subaru can't understand it. The person who destroyed them has two personalities, and they forgive the personality which destroyed them, but not the one who didn't—what did it mean?

Echidna: “I've always been advocating that the distinction's pointless, but... agree to disagree. I can't ignore that opinion and eradicate the thing. My frail mental-bodied self wouldn't stand any chance if the others hoist the petard on me after I eradicated it. Even I, when in a state of being only a soul, won't return if blast to pieces.”

Subaru: “B... ut, wouldn't that be seriously risky for the other five too? You're the one entrusted with the other five's souls. If you disappear, the other witches'll...”

Echidna: “They comprehend and affirm their own DEATHS. And so they have no especial attachment to prolonged existence as only a soul. —If it's between yielding and surviving, and being destroyed sacrificing themselves for their ideals, they'd infinitely favour the latter. It's because they think this way that they're witches.”

Sekhmet and Camilla speak up for no denials of that.

Resolute—is not quite a word that fits with how resigned an opinion it is, but regardless the harshness of the witches' lifestyles leaves Subaru without words.

If I could be like this, I wish that I were like this, and such kind of aspiration was something everyone did.

But to die and nonetheless stick through with one's principles after death was not a stance everybody could confidently claim.

Subaru: “And Minerva...” Probably the same.

She was the one who, by the hands of the WITCH OF ENVY, had likely been destroyed before anyone

else. But nevertheless Minerva trusted the Witch, who had done absolutely nothing all along her getting to within arm's reach, which consequently proved that trust.

Subaru didn't know the relationships between these witches.

If they had bonds enough to trust enough other, then why did the WITCH OF ENVY destroy the other six witches? And why did the witches forgive it?

Echidna's thoughts on it were the ones Subaru could still understand. But, even so—

Subaru: “I get that this's what you're like. And fully comprehend... ing it's hard but, I can understand it. But, I still haven't heard what it is she's come here for.”

Witches: “—”

Subaru: “I get that she isn't going to unconditionally indiscriminately attack. That one I'll fully comprehend. ...But that doesn't mean she's safe. If the one I've been seeing all up until now was the WITCH OF ENVY, then what is it Satella wants to do with me? The WITCH OF ENVY to me is someone who is entirely a pest. You can tell me abruptly that my view's wrong, but understanding it's beyond me.”

And if you put the witches' statements all together, the person here is unquestionably Satella, who consumed the others. Then even assuming that the one who swallowed SANCTUARY was the WITCH OF ENVY, it would suggest that Satella is entirely capable of comparable things.

Who could blame him for feeling danger, being wary, and keeping away?

Subaru: “What she wants to do, and why she came here. So long as I don't know that...!” Minerva: “If that's what you want to know, then just come over here.”

Just as Subaru goes to raise his voice, Minerva interrupts.

She puts her hand on her hip, and makes no attempt to hide her irritation as she scowls at Subaru.

Minerva: “You've had enough with the wordy excuses and drawing defences. I'm here standing right next to her, and nothing's happened. And also, the reason she came here's to see you. If you're saying you're such a loser you can't even get close to her, then we can do that's left is file this away as us making an entire misestimation.”

Subaru: “Like you have fucking anything to misestimate! Don't just make your speculation about me! Stop pushing your crap on me! What the hell would you

all know about me!?”

Having someone push their image of him onto him, and then acting exactly in line with that image was a no thank you.

Once, when Subaru yelled this exactly same thing, there came a voice who answered him. He remembers what they said. And back then, those words had been his support.

—If he wasn't going to betray his past self, saved by those words, then...
Subaru: “Just, fuck... you're thinking stupid here, me...”

Nothing rational, making decisions entirely off his emotional momentum.

He'd done no reflection on the terrible experiences that doing that exact thing had given him. He would pay greater vigilance to the slightest of changes, suppress his emotions, and coolly act not off his mental impulses but according to definite truth—he would preserve an unshakable heart of iron.

Was meant to be his precept. Minerva: “You're being slow.”

Subaru: “How scary it is to approach someone you've wrangled almost to your death with is... shit, actually you do know that. It's hard.”

Minerva: “It's not that we don't have our thoughts on this either. Sekhmet and Camilla are just way more mature, unlike me. I've got a reason to back her.”

Subaru clicks his tongue as he walks over, Minerva giving a shrug. She presents him no time to ask about her reason or whatever, instead handing the scene over to Subaru.

The WITCH OF WRATH moves aside, and what results is Subaru facing the Witch—facing Satella— at extreme close range.

Subaru: “—”

Subaru unwittingly gulps, the strangeness of the creature before him catching him lost for words. He was supposed to have recognized this as he viewed her from afar, and as he saw her in his approach here, but regardless he cannot dispel her emitted pressure and the visual sense of awriness. The dress of shadows clinging to her form traces out her curves and body with horrific sensuality, and the invisibility of everything from the neck up conversely creates an inverse kind of lusciousness.

Those impressions drown utterly away thanks to the dissonance of her entirely uncognizable head. Subaru: “—”

Looking at her from up close, Subaru realises that the thing obstructing his cognizance is nothing physical.

What looks like a shadow covering her face is not actually because a shadow falling over that area is blocking it from view.

That he can't see her face originates from a more mental, more primordial reason.

No physical obstacle is keeping her face from view. It is something instinctive, NOT ALLOWING HIM TO SEE IT.

Echidna: “Everyone wishes to avert their eyes from their most repulsive, spurious delusions.” Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “If you can't see that face, it's due to a problem of your own heart.”

Useful advice comes flying in from behind to back up Subaru's deduction.

Managing to withstand his urge to click his tongue, Subaru ignores Echidna—or more rather, he remains without any leeway to devote her any attention as he continues facing Satella.

Satella still has yet to make any kind of action.

The only thing Satella has done is appear here. The people around her kicked up a fuss by themselves, getting frantic in an attempt to protect against escalation in damages resultant from her actions.

That by simply being present she fostered so much fear in itself displayed the vivid truth of her hazardousness. That would probably be no exaggeration.

And, the instant Subaru grows impatient with the lack of motion, it happens.

Subaru: “—hk”

Satella: “—”

Seeing the two arms presented out to him, Subaru's throat freezes.

For not a single second, not even a single blink had Subaru shifted his attention away from Satella. He wouldn't know what could happen after any instant—was the tension, which the movement of these high out-of-nowhere arms easily toys with.

His surprise is not for a failure to see the movement. Subaru had very clearly seen Satella's arms move. What surprises him is his own consciousness, which had regardless watched silently over the motion until it reached its end.

Subaru: “What, really... are you? What do you want with me?”

He had not been able to take any useful action in response to her presented hands. More or less unconsciously understanding what meaning that held, Subaru promptly comes up with words. To end this without accepting the truth, to end this without facing her, strangled out his mouth.

Subaru: “If you're the one giving me the power to redo... why, is that...” He doesn't understand what Satella's intentions are.

And he doesn't understand his body, which although facing Satella, standing within range to touch her, unconsciously screaming again and again that she is dangerous, won't listen to him.

—The reaction of his body, which is unconsciously attempting to feel RELIEVED when faced with Satella.

Satella: “—u,”

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Unable to accept his body as it goes defying his will, Subaru is slow to react to the sound hitting his eardrums. This time was unmistakably a correct reaction which had come with no intentions attached.

Swallowing his breath, Subaru waits for her to continue.

With her yet-invisible face still faced toward Subaru as he holds his breath, waiting for her, the time slowly, slowly passes on—and Satella speaks.

Satella: “—ou.”

Subaru: “—”

Satella:

“Always you. Always only you, am I in love with.”

Chapter 77: A Lonely...

What to call the shock that slammed Subaru's entirety the second he heard that confession of love? A lightningbolt jolt courses down from his crown to his toenails.

His open-pored flesh tingles with goosebumps, the blood running through his veins seething to an eager boil. His thumping heartbeat flushes him from the neck up in crimson. Slipping a ragged breath, Subaru retreats a step.

He cannot keep standing here.

He keeps standing here, and his breathing will reach her. His fingertips will reach her.

If he fails to open distance between her in this juncture where his reason is still holding back his instinct, all breaks are off.

And should that happen, Subaru will drown to LOVE. Subaru: "Stop..."

Satella: "I am in love with you." Subaru: "Please stop..."

Satella: "You—only you—will I always, always be in love with." Subaru: "I told you to fucking stop!"

Shaking his head, swinging his arm, Subaru pulls his attention away from her hot, entangling gaze. Of course, Satella's expression is invisible to Subaru. Just what kind of fire her gaze held as she stares at Subaru is nothing he can figure.

But nevertheless, the feverish pounding in his chest shows absolutely no signs of stopping.

By consciously holding everything restrained, frantically speaking out, thrusting her with a rejection ragged enough to near make him spit blood, Subaru manages to preserve his fundamental self.

Literally, if he does not endeavour in an effort to maintain his consciousness like this, he is convinced that the fundamental core of his being will distort. And

that was an overwhelmingly terrifying image.

Blatantly rejecting her, displaying such open disgust, and stricken with this truth is Subaru, who Satella faces by standing exactly stock-still as before.

Her invisible face, a veil of darkness enveloping her expression. He can't discern it. Shouldn't be able to comprehend it, but he inadvertently understands that his words have just hurt Satella, and probably she cast her gaze down. His heart thinks its desire to gently stroke her hair, speak words to ease her pained face, whisper loves to her and make her smile.

And although he denies it this much, his heart continues to urge that he LOVE Satella.

Subaru: “Y... what are you!? What did you put in me!? Something like with RETURN BY DEATH, you put something in me to manipulate my heart!?”

Subaru flings his distrust for his heart, failing to abide his will, at Satella.

His heart, which was abruptly now showing reactions wholly beyond his understanding. If this witch and her supernatural powers were interfering with his powerful emotions, that was overwhelmingly horrifying.

Twisting people's hearts to suit her will—that was a deed abhorrent, less than human.

The first resplendent hope vested on Natsuki Subaru in this world was his LOVE'S AWAKENING for Emilia.

Subaru had been lost and blind without any guideline or landmark. His indebtedness to Emilia as she offered him her hand out of his predicament, and

the memory of the grace to his near-wholly abraded heart, had even now lost none of their lustre as they yet proceeded to illumine her.

During his time sucked into repeating loops of death, struggling solo as he surmounted various adversities, the ones he held dear and desired to protect had multiplied. With the accumulation of words he had shared with these people, these bonds, these feelings, the multitude of what Subaru harboured compounded.

He could no longer say that his feelings for Emilia were his only motivator, even as a lie.

But nevertheless, Natsuki Subaru's first light had been Emilia. And Satella was coercing on Subaru a LOVE'S AWAKENING on equal par to what he felt for Emilia.

Neverminding the lack of words shared between them, no warmth of mutual touch, no time spent passed together, no bond built, the utter lack of anything between them in their relationship, Satella was attempting to extort only FEELINGS OF LOVE.

What to call this if not horrendous?

Subaru: "You, and Echidna... you're both nuts! This... this place's just full of incomprehensible bastards! I'm sick of it!"

Yells Subaru without hiding his repulsion for the faceless witch before him, and the white-haired witch behind him.

Satella who compelled feelings of love contrary to his inner will, and Echidna who would entangle strangers with her unempathizable curiosity. Both were aberrations beyond Subaru's comprehension.

Echidna: “It does sting to be equated to that thing. Even should you treat us under the single category of 'witch', my view has that thing as a vulgar creature a witch's inferior. Incomprehensible, is a judgement where you're not wrong, though.”

Subaru: “Just be quiet. I haven't forgotten your insidiousness in pretending to be friendly. ...Enough. There's no point being here. Let me out. I don't wanna be involved with you people any more!”

Responding unkindly to Echidna's words, Subaru grabs his head as he pleads to be released from the castle in a dream.

He didn't want to be around Satella and Echidna for even another second. He already had innumerable things he needed to do, and now was not the time to be compounding that count. Being not omniscient, Subaru had a limit on what he could deal with. He already had obstacles surpassing his limit obstructing his way, so why was it that even more problems had to come one-after-another adding themselves on, too?

Subaru: “I'm not taking your help. I'll do something about all the problems outside by myself. —

And what was ever wrong with that idea! That's what I should've been doing from the start...”

Minerva: “And? So it's back to dying over and over, making heaps of people cry while spouting excuses how THIS IS INFORMATION GATHERING, NOTHING TO DO ABOUT IT. Wow. Amazing.”

Says Minerva, snorting at Subaru as he speaks his definite farewell. Subaru shoots her a glare. Minerva's nonplussed expression begins reddening.

Minerva: “What. Trying to make me repeat?”

Subaru: “Like it has anything to do with you. The pain, the anguish, the hurt, the wear from RETURN BY DEATH is all my problem. You've got nowhere to complain about it.”

Minerva: “Saying you're ready for hurt and pain and anguish sure lets you be at ease. No matter what the people watching you spitting blood with your flesh shredded and bones broken think, you can always use the excuse that you're the one suffering most.”

Subaru: “What!?”

Minerva: “If you bear the most obvious, showy and visible wounds, you can end everything without those wounded by the aftermath of your behaviour being able to say anything. After all, you're the one suffering most. You're the one hurting most. You're the one in the most pain. ...That the others around you would shut up their snivelling's just natural.”

Perhaps with rage building up over her speech, Minerva's intonation gets stronger as she proceeds. Subaru bares his teeth. Spoken to with such spite, Subaru being Subaru cannot possibly go without objecting.

Subaru: “You! You're saying that I'm drunk on overblown tragedies so that I can shut everyone else up, huh!? That this stalemate I'm in is just part of the act!?”

Minerva: “No, that's not where I'm going. But the logic of I JUST NEED TO BE HURT MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE is coward's logic. I don't think a lot of

Echidna's maliciousness, and I couldn't even hope to understand how roundabout Satella is, but... to me, compared to a witch the way you're twisted is heaps more sickening.”

Subaru: “—”

Minerva: “Above all else, with my lifestyle of beating everything wounded into health, your lifestyle isn't so much an antithesis as a nemesis. —She isn't exactly being repaid.”

Jabbing her fist out at Subaru, Minerva finishes her statement with even her nose's breathing ragged. Following that she appends her last statement in a whisper, her azure eyes aimed at Satella. Ever since Subaru showered curses on her, Satella has simply remained there standing still in silence. She gives no affirmations or denials, showing no stance at all about this little exchange.

Subaru sees Minerva's eyes narrow, somewhat sadly.

Subaru couldn't give a crap about their emotionalities right now. Subaru: “Sickening... unrepaid...?”

Catching the last words of Minerva's statements, Subaru faces down as his shoulders start to tremble. The tremble escalates, and when he raises his head, he is smiling.

It was all entirely too fucking asinine, he couldn't go without laughing.

Subaru: “The fuck is that. Say sickening or anything, I've gotten to be choosing the methods I am because why? I've gotten to be thinking in this so-dubbed twisted mentality because why? My methods and mindset—when you consider what I have this's just the innate consequence—that's what it goddamn is.”

Satella: “—”

Subaru: “You! Are! Who did this to me!”

Screams Subaru, throwing his rage at Satella, as she attempts with silence to escape from her responsibility.

Having received RETURN BY DEATH, used this attribute to overcome obstacles, then confronted many and varied troubles, Subaru had managed to run as far as here.

Every time the oft-experienced despair known as DEATH etched itself into his soul, he transformed that misery into the power to step forward, and with that he had dashed to here.

—It was Natsuki Subaru's injury-fraught experiences that had allowed Subaru to reach these thoughts.

Subaru: “The pain and the suffering! All of it, all only on me! Finish it all with me, and how is that not grand! I grit my teeth, stifle my ire and my woe and my all and my every, and no matter how terribly I die, the despair doesn't get to touch anybody else! Beginning to end all the hurts only on me, and what is wrong with that! How is anything to fault with that!”

By repeating RETURN BY DEATH, following the end of much trial and error, Subaru is capable of finding the truly optimum path. It is exactly as Echidna said. He wouldn't follow along with Echidna's curiosity-driven temptations, but he was okay to continually attempt to same thing solo. Unlike Echidna who was attempting to take a roundabout course, Subaru was devoting his absolute all to directly uncovering the optimum route. His retry attempts would be overwhelmingly fewer than if he were cooperating with Echidna. Naturally he

did expect for the retry count to be outrageous. But even so there was merit in trying.

Provided where injury-laden Subaru's outstretched arm reached was a future where no one was hurt.

Subaru: "Mentioned 'incomprehensible, sick of it' before, didn't I. Well sorry, that was my bad there. Those feelings aren't a lie even for an instant, but there's still something I am thankful to you for.

Totally forgot. Forgot it, and isn't ingratitude just another thing I'm great at."

Satella: "—"

Subaru: "There's exactly one thing I am thankful to you for. Huge appreciation for letting me RETURN BY DEATH. That's all I'm thanking you for. I wouldn'ta protected even a single important thing without it. And from now on I'm gonna be depending on it too. And so for this one single thing alone you are getting my thanks."

He was already prepared for the continuous trial and error. The option to flee from this fate was long ago abolished.

Has been ever since he took her hand and proposed to run, to be rejected.

There is no option to flee. He can only keep fighting. That is what he pledged. That was what she expected of him. Believed in him. That Subaru would keep fighting, without running.

Subaru is a man who always gets back up. And if he was not, he could not continue being Rem's hero.

Subaru: “So here's my thanks for this power you gave me. By your esteem, even an utterly meritless prick like me can in these hopeless situations...”

Satella: “—Don't.”

Subaru: “Hopeless, situations...”

Subaru showers her with the fire stored up in his heart, spewing it all out—when Satella breaks her silence with a murmur.

Hearing that one fragment, Subaru's words dull of their momentum. His face stiffens, and that murmur he just heard, he desires to hear again.

What did she just say? It almost sounds like there was something she didn't want to hear. Subaru swallows his breath as Satella lets the time pass, and again, speaks.

Satella: “—Please don't cry. Please don't hurt. Please don't suffer. Please don't, look sad.”

Whispers Satella to Subaru.

Her statement rocks his heart violently. With rage, with surprise, with a jumbling of every single unidentifiable emotion he had.

Subaru: “Y, ou... that...”

The maelstrom of emotion is much too big, and he has not a clue what to say.

His intense feelings block his throat as he flaps his mouth open and closed, looking at Satella in shock.

Satella proceeds in her jolting of the shaken Subaru. Satella: “So, now you

love.”

Subaru: “Ul, timately comes back to that, then. ...You're just all about twisting my emotions to get me to eventually love you. What your saying's...” Satella: “—No.”

Satella interrupts Subaru's unsteady words with a shake of her head.

Her expression remains invisible. But by his skin Subaru can perceive just how Satella is looking at him from behind the curtain of dark.

—Satella, right now, she was

Satella: “—Now you love yourself, more.” Surely, gazing at Subaru with mercy.

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It requires Subaru quite a bit a time for the meaning of those words to sink into his brain. What dominates Subaru's heart the instant the meaning does permeate is a formless, shake-provoking wave of emotion.

Subaru: “Fuck... are you, saying.”

Satella: “...Please don't hurt. Be more dear to yourself.”

Subaru: “And when you're the one who gave me RETURN BY DEATH. And when the power you gave me's what's given me this method of advancing.”

Satella: “—I love you. So please, love yourself as well, protect yourself.”

Subaru: “If my piteousness leads you to steal this method from me! What the fuck will be left for me!!”

In rejection of Satella's unending whispers of love, Subaru shouts at he puts his hand to his chest.

Subaru: "You have to know too, don't you!? I am completely powerless! No wits, no skill, I have no special powers at all! The only thing my inconsequential self has is the RETURN BY DEATH which you gave me! My life is the only possible payment I have to offer!"

Satella: "Please don't sorrow."

Subaru: "I've already sussed that it'll be painful, that I'll meet fates like death. And I'm fine with that, I am fine with that! If the only one who has to hurt in this is me, then I am fine with that!"

Satella: "Please don't suffer."

Subaru: "If I get damaged more than anybody else, I experience more than anybody else, go around to protect everyone, then it's all settled with nobody except me going through anything painful!

There's nothing more I want!" Satella: "Please don't cry."

Subaru: "It sure doesn't fucking matter what happens to me! Like it would bother anybody what happens to some ass like me! However torn up I get, so long as everybody can reach the future safely, then...hk"

After all, if Subaru failed to continue being wounded at the front lines—
Subaru: "If we can welcome the future, without losing anyone, then...hk"

—He might irreparably lose somebody again. Subaru: "...Rem is, gone."

Satella: "—"

Subaru: "If I were smarter, had more ability, spent myself more liberally, placed myself at risk in the lead... we would've avoided it."

The dolour and despair from back then remained binding Subaru always.

And so Subaru had elected, without relying on anyone, to continue being wounded fighting solo. Doing so was the most correct course, is what he had believed.

Subaru: "I have to believe... I have to believe there's some way I can do something..." Believe that RETURN BY DEATH is a means that will solve everything.

Believe that if he could just use it well, he could end this without losing anything.

Believing this ethic, instructing himself of that, and so being wounded were all necessary. If he did not convince himself this was true, how could he possibly confront that despair again?

Subaru: "I! Don't want to lose anyone like how I lost Rem any more—!"
Grabbing his head, Subaru shrieks in rejection of every audible sound.

Before he knows it, he's squatted to the ground. Forgetting even to distance himself from Satella as he retreats into his shell, Subaru curls up as he denies her sweet whisperings.

Poison. She was poison. Everything of Satella's existence was a will-melting poison for Subaru.

Subaru's heart, supposedly having pledged to stay strong, fractures.

Inside the cracks there slips a cold despair, bringing back the memories of that day's dolour to pulverise Subaru's heart.

Sekhmet: “What a child.” Mutters a voice.

Seeing Subaru screaming and crying, obstinately sticking to his self-made beliefs, shaking his head

like 'I don't wanna, I don't wanna', one of the silent witches mutters.

Sekhmet: “Crying, bawling, throwing a tantrum, taking everything upon himself... it's exactly like what...”

Subaru: “—”

Sekhmet: “—A lonely child would do.”

Is how Sekhmet appraises Subaru, in sympathetic and pitying voice. The silent witches make no action to refute Sekhmet's mutters.

The WITCH OF SLOTH had made an incredibly apt judgement.

For Subaru's visage presently was that of a small, weak, pitiable child.

Chapter 78: These Sounds To Shed Tears

Sekhmet: “Curling up, being stubborn... like a child. It's painful to see, and I can't bear to watch it— haa.”

Hearing Sekhmet's words as she appraises him as a child, withdrawn small inside his shell, Subaru thinks: You might be exactly correct.

Getting obstinate, believing he was right, paying no mind to what others said in his stubbornness— but even said, his methods were indeed the ones with least casualties, and reliable.

Imposing on repeats of the world to attain countless opportunities, Subaru could infinitely fight so long as he kept paying his life in exchange. Over the process Subaru's heart would assuredly weather again and again, come to the border of completely abrading.

But—for those times where he was brittle, near broken to pieces, Subaru already had been given the words to right and inspire him.

???: <—You're my hero, Subaru-kun.> There. That was all Subaru needed.

If following his soul's erosion he had those words and everybody's presence, then he could desire nothing more.

Just what was so wrong with that?

???: “—Baru's crying?”

A young voice rings through the silence of the scene. The witches swallow their breath.

A small little hand pats the head of the curled-up Subaru. Glancing up, Subaru sees through his tear-blurred vision the dimly-reflected sight of a tan-skinned girl.

Subaru's frail gaze has landed on the WITCH OF PRIDE.

Typhon: “He's crying lots—poor sad boy. ...Who made him cry?”

Typhon gets up from bending over as she glowers at the other witches as they wordlessly stand there.

Her eyes host a fierce gleam as she looks over the other witches in sequence, her eyebrows raising as she lastly notices Satella's presence.

Typhon: “Tella? Tella's here? Why? Been lots of time.”

Typhon gives a wave as she calls to Satella, but the belligerent light in her eyes remains vivid. The first one to address this Typhon is Sekhmet, who gives a languid sigh as she uprights herself.

Sekhmet: “Typhon... Haa—He's having a retreat right now, so—hoo—don't prod the boy—haa. Come over here—hoo.”

Typhon: “Mom—did you do bad to Baru? Mom—are you a baddie?”

Sekhmet: “Your mom—haa—doesn't have the energy to be a bad person—hoo. I've got no impulse to make either you or me do any work, you see—haa.”

Typhon gives a small nod, but shows no signs of distancing from Subaru as she was told. This time it's Minerva she looks at.

Typhon: “Nerva? Did you bully Ba... nah.”

Minerva: “How come you're not asking me. It's totally not right. It's not like I'm always all about healing people, every so often I leave myself to the seething emotions of violence in my heart and... maybe, I... sometimes could hurt... hurt people, or something too.”

Echidna: “It's pretty hard to imagine that someone who pales just by envisioning it could commit an act of violence.”

Echidna shrugs as she teases Minerva and her rather implausible reply. Minerva glares sharply at Echidna, Typhon's gaze following the same path to likewise land on her. Typhon's young face twists into a frown.

Typhon: “Chidna. Chidna—did you do something bad again? Chidna—you're the baddie?”

Echidna: “Now what could it mean that it sounds more like a conclusion when it's asked to me. I'm thinking I'd like to ask her foster parent about that one in rigorous detail but, your thoughts?”

Sekhmet: “It's what you always do—haa.”

Sekhmet exhaustedly puts her hand to her forehead. Typhon remains unseparated from Subaru's side, vigilantly looking to find 'the baddie who made Subaru cry'.

Narrowing her eyes at the young witch's pep, Echidna mutters. Echidna: “That aside.”

Echidna: “With Typhon also showing up here, we've almost got a full

assemblage. If Daphne showed up as well, it'd be a memory of four hundred years ago...”

???: “Did somebod-y, just call for me?”

As if in response to Echidna's wonder, a black coffin abruptly appears in the meadow.

Fully bound by restraints inside the coffin with blindfolds over her eyes, this is the WITCH OF GLUTTONY Daphne.

She gives a small sniff, and having figured out everyone present by her sense of smell,

Daphne: “Ne-ver-mind Su-ba-ruun, Tella-Tella's here too? How amazing is this. Seven witches of deadly sin all together, and then even a sage candidate...”¹¹

Echidna: “Daphne. —He's not there yet.”

Daphne: “...Ahh, well, that's, apologies. But a-ny-way... sniff, sniff. I smell something sal-ty, is someone crying? Is it Ner-Ner?”

⁸ Unclear if sage candidate should be 'a' or 'the'.

Daphne's failure to consider what's going on and floaty-toaty speech casually whack the tension of the scene.

This scene of the seven witches all together, including Satella, was not a sight that occurred so often even four hundred years ago.

The seven witches who once thrust the world into chaos—now in this livewire situation, powers liable to reshape the world itself were assembled together here.

The WITCH OF PRIDE—looking to cast judgement on the one who had made a small boy cry. The WITCH OF WRATH—clenching her fists, looking for her close friend's feelings to bear fruit. The WITCH OF SLOTH—paying heed to everyone's movements, languidly prepared to instantly attack if anything should happen.

The WITCH OF LUST—preserving her uninvolved demeanour, ready to protect only herself should matters escalate into a split-second situation.

The WITCH OF GLUTTONY—already unconcerned about any changes in the situation, puzzling over whose fingers would be best to munch.

The WITCH OF GREED—although displeased with the presence of one witch, her eyes sparkle with curiosity for whatever could possibly happen next.

And not the WITCH OF ENVY, but Satella—

Satella: “I am in love with you. —Because you gave me light. Because you took me by the hand, and taught me the world outside. Because through nights where in solitude I shivered, you kept by my side with your hands around mine. Because, then being alone, by your kiss you told me I wasn't.

There are so many things you've given to me. ...And so, I love you. Because you—you gave me everything.”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru has not a single memory of any involvement in any part of Satella's whisperings.

He isn't part of it, doesn't know any of it. He has never met Satella, never

spoken with her, never overlaid his warmth with hers. Everything she is talking about is the fruits of her delusion. This woman insane with sentiment had lined up empty daydreams where she simply watched a fantasy of Subaru.

Is what this should be, but NATSUKI SUBARU does know this.

Subaru: “Why're this... inside me, what is this? I don't want to feel this. Don't tether me with, non-existent memories... I... I damn... I goddamn...”

Hate you, is all he has to say.

All he has to do is stab the one giving him their feelings with the announcement that he held not a single speck of fondness for her. Then would be spectating just what expression the one egotistically trying to distort his emotions would make. Bet the pain to her heart would have her face twisting magnificently.

—How are you capable of doing that to her? Typhon: “Baru?”

Sekhmet: “Oh, kid...”

Camilla: “H-He's...”

Minerva: “You...”

Daphne: “Subaruun?”

Echidna: “—Ah, that is yet another possible choice. Natsuki Subaru.”

The witches call to Subaru in their various ways, Echidna giving a small nod at this outcome. Subaru: “—ghh, bhg”

—Still squatted curled up on the ground, Subaru bites to sever his tongue.

The witches had cornered him in, and he had no idea of what was anything anymore.

In these conditions where his heart feels near to twisting, what remains for Subaru if even his volition is no longer free to act at will?

If his stubbornness had simply been negated, then even that would still be okay.

If interacting with Satella makes him accepting even of being negated... The thought terrified Subaru.

—When happens, when you lose your life in a dream? Subaru's body should still be inside SANCTUARY's tomb.

What had been called here was Subaru's mental body, or perhaps said soul. If his mental body dies here, would that cause feedback on his physical body? Would his soul die?

He didn't care. If it was a death to reset, he was ready for it.

He would not take the witches' help, he would scour himself down greater than he ever had before, cut away everything superfluous, and if he remained simply and wholeheartedly enthusiastic, the path would surely open. —He did this, and he'd...

Minerva: “That, idiot!”

The instant she notices Subaru's attempt at suicide, Minerva rolls up her sleeves and dashes, running to slam her healing fists into him. But, cutting in to stand between she and him is Typhon.

The young witch stretches her little limbs out wide, blocking Minerva.
Typhon: “Baru chose it himself! Nerva—no interrupting!”

Minerva: “Wounding or suicide or murder or injury are nothing I'll allow before me! Mental anguish is goddamn nothing I care about! I couldn't give less of a crap about invisible wounds! And instead! Visible wounds alone I absolutely won't overlook!”

The ground caves in beneath her single step, Minerva's fist drilling through the wind as it closes in on Typhon's face.

The plummeting fist carries enough force to rupture a mountain, but the moment before it strikes a living creature that destructive energy converts to healing energy. However, the impact of the shockwave and blow itself do normally affect the target of the punch.

The boom resounds, the strike from Minerva's outstretched arm sending Typhon soaring.

The undeveloped girl shunts away easily as a leaf, dancing high through the meadow's false sky. It's a scene devoid of mercy—but Typhon is not the only one suffering damage.

Minerva: “—!”

From the shoulder down, Minerva's right arm shatters like ice crystals.

This was the result of having touched the judgement of the WITCH OF PRIDE, and her deed having been determined as evil.

Minerva looks to the sky, pained at the lost of her aim, opening her mouth

wide to shriek— Minerva: “A scratch!!”

—or not.

The WITCH OF WRATH, highly attuned to the pain of others, infinitely disregarded her own pain. This was exactly playing ignorant to Natsuki Subaru's lifestyle, and disregarding herself for later.

Minerva: “Anyway, now I—!”

The obstacle gone, Minerva wrenches back her left arm as she bounds for Subaru. From above him her mighty arm aims to smash Subaru and—

Sekhmet: “I'll be getting in your way next—haa.”

Her blonde hair swaying to the motion, it takes a single instant for Minerva to slam into the ground. Her body pressed down to the earth as she creates a human-shaped crater in the meadow, Minerva raises her furious-red face as she screams at the seated Sekhmet.

Minerva: “Stop getting in the way! Sekhmet!”

Sekhmet: “That I won't be doing—huu. Sentimentally speaking, I'm on the kid's side—haa. And to add to that, I'm also on Typhon's side—huu. I have no reason not to get in the way—haa.”

Minerva frustratedly bites her lip at Sekhmet's battle declaration as she looks to the other witches. But, Daphne and Camilla are neutral to this fight unfolding, while Echidna is an onlooker surveying what results the spat will each. And Satella—

Satella: "Ahh... auhh..."

Crumbled to her knees as she sees Subaru spewing great loads of sanguine out his mouth, her voice trembles.

With the overflowing blood and his severed tongue blocking his throat, Subaru undergoes the

feeling of drowning as he catches Satella in a corner of his consciousness.

Crying, wasn't she.

She looked immeasurably shaken, witnessing Subaru's DEATH.

Satella: "Why haven't you realised...? That of everything you wish to protect, of course you should be included."

Why was it she thought this way about Subaru?

In her delusions, just how much of a support was Subaru for her heart?

Satella: "As it does to those struggling in the dead-end of fate, of course it would visit you too. But just because you alone have possibility of overturning it... you're someone who should be saved too, so why?"

She's entirely wrong.

Subaru was a hopeless fuck, unable to succeed even in the things he thought himself capable, unable to save those he wished to save, entirely a half-measures never-there prick, and he would never escape from that.

Had he not pledged? To escape from that, and to stop doing things halfway?
Had he not decided? To pretend to he was any better?

—His weak self, and his self desiring not to be weak, fight inside him. Nobody may witness Natsuki Subaru's weakness now.

The strong, dignified, resolute lifestyle of a hero was what Subaru needed to live.

There was a girl who desired such of him. Subaru had placed a curse on that girl, and responsibility was on him to repay that girl his curse had bound. —No. Responsibility was nothing in the picture. Just, if she was believing in him, then he wanted to be as someone who would gain that belief.

Because that girl told Subaru she loved him, Subaru wished to be someone who would continually gain her 'love you's.

Yes. That was it. That was it.

If hypothetically saying for assumption that there were somebody who would mourn Subaru's

DEATH, it'd be her.

Choosing DEATH was a betrayal of the girl who had believed in him. Of course, Subaru had no intentions to end merely with DEATH. He was prepared to use even DEATH as a stepping stone to abolish the reason behind the DEATH, and regain everything.

But, what happened to the people the DEATH-electing Subaru had left behind?

He mustn't think of it.

He mustn't know of it. Those thoughts were dangerous thoughts. It was fine. Natsuki Subaru, as he was, was fine.

He mustn't think that somebody out there was mourning him.

He wasn't anybody worth such a thing. Subaru's life was a consumable item. Use it, use it, use it up, and ultimately reach the end—that was the single-merit consumable it ought to be.

Utilize dying practically and with effect. Absolutely do not face his own DEATH.

Rationalize. He is fine to think nothing. For salvaging what he wished to salvage, determine to throw away what must be thrown away. Everyone does it. Subaru, too, ought to.

He saves those precious to him, those who ought to be saved, then this was all fine. If he could only do that, then Subaru—

Satella: “What on earth was it you saw, in the second TRIAL...?”

Trial. —Trial. Trial, TRIAL. TrialTrialTrial, TRIALTrialTrialTrial, Trial—? Shock and insufficient oxygen dull his thinking incredibly.

His vision blurs and blurs in a world flickering red, a storm like television noise running through his head, as he dimly thinks that the end ought to get on with it.

The end was coming slowly.

What number was he on for times meeting DEATH? Counting was a nuisance, but that was okay.

Eventually, he would have to repeat and repeat his deaths until counting it

was sickening.

He doubted he could keep living maintaining a mentality which would bother tallying his deaths.

Heart of iron.

Entirely unshakable, a heart of iron, in hand—

Slowly and slowly, Subaru's consciousness departs. And, fades,

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???: <I'm expecting things from you, son.> A sound.

From beyond the noise, amongst the din, a horrifically clear sound.

???: <—Come home safe.> Again.

A different sound, but again. Bringing about the same thing to his chest, a sound.

???: <I had wished to call you a friend.>

Different sound. A changed feeling to it, too.

This one terribly agitated him. But, it also had a pleasantness to it.

???: <Subaru-dono... I sincerely beg, for your forgiveness...> Different sound again.

Between the sombreness and near-aspiration crossing in his chest, a sound to guilt at.

???: <I, at least knew that... you aren't, they... but...> A sound to constrict his chest.

He hears this sound, and he cannot restrain himself. A sound near to tears. A sound which must not

come to tears. A sound he must protect. Sound. Sound. Sound.

???: <Show me how awesome you can be, Subaru-kun.>

The sound of something inside him thumping to a high beat is his reaction to this sound.

His body heats. A sense of duty spurs him to motion. This sound, had always been supporting him. And,

???: <Thank you, Subaru.> This sound.

???: <—For saving me.>

—This sound, which announced the beginning of everything.

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He was probably crying.

If the people Subaru thought dearly of knew of his death, would they grieve for him?

Those irreplaceable people he had left behind in the worlds where he had selfishly experienced

DEATH, had they lamented Subaru's death, and grieved for him?

Those who had lost Subaru as he mourned his insufficient strength, repeating RETURNS BY DEATH in search of the optimum, failing at the final step—had they

mourned for him?

There were people who he thought of as precious. There were people who he believed he must protect.

There were people who he implored he must save from the dead-end of fate.

—Did he possess enough worth that those precious people would mourn him?

It was him, but he was enough for his precious ones to think him someone precious. So was his conceit, but was it okay?

It was him, but he was needed enough for those he wished to protect to wish to protect him. So was his inadvertent belief, but was it okay?

It was him, but he had enough worth for there to be people who would cry at his passing, that he could reach out to for rescue.

So was his inadvertent wish, but would he be pardoned it?

—Was it okay for him to think it? I don't want to die.

I don't want to give up, thinking this method is the only one.

I don't want to disappear as I be the cornerstone for protecting the future of those precious to me.

In the future where they're protected, there alongside those precious to me, I

want to be too. He could think like this, but was it okay?

Did he have these qualifications? If he did, then—

Subaru: “I don't, wanna die...”

Alongside the sound of splurting blood and escaping air, he speaks.

His supposedly tongue-clogged throats opens, his mouth flapping as he gasps for air. His lungs expand, oxygen cycles through his brain, his faded vision starts returning.

And,

Minerva: “There's his real thoughts...”

—Her face fully red as she heals Subaru with a headbutt, the WITCH OF WRATH reaches him absent her legs, but on willpower.

Chapter 79: End Of The Dream

The moment he realises that air is passing through his windpipe, Subaru gives an incredible cough to expel the remaining blood in his throat.

Still collapsed face-up on the ground as he pants, taking ragged breath after ragged breath, Subaru seeks oxygen, seeks the nourishment of life.

His heart has no timeslot to ponder on how wretched he looks right now.

But he does think that his weakness, unhesitatingly clinging to the path of rescue presented before him after severing his tongue in a bid for DEATH, is miserable.

Subaru: “My...”

Minerva: “—Hm?”

Subaru: “My life has value...? Without dying... value other than in dying over and over... exists, for me?”

RETURN BY DEATH, and in doing so save everyone from the grips of despair.

This outcome was one he could attain by paying his life, and he had believed it the only value to Natsuki Subaru.

But, maybe, could it be okay to think otherwise?

Subaru: “This person, me, has value other than in RETURN BY DEATH... is that okay for me to think? That the people I like... like me back too, can I... can I think, like that?”

Minerva: "...All that's nothing I could care about." Says Minerva bluntly as she averts her gaze.

She nimbly drags herself away from Subaru using only her left arm, having lost her right and her legs, as she turns to face her right shoulder—and bites. Immediately, droplets of light regenerate Minerva's missing arm.

Clenching and unclenching the fist of her now-sleeveless right arm, Minerva next goes for her legs

—each missing from the thighs down. She punches at the root of the severance, and just like her arms, both her legs regenerate.

Her already-short skirt has grown even shorter, and with her bare right arm her appearance is very risky, but regardless the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva has returned to fighting fit condition.

She stands well on her regained legs, crossing her arms in a pose which emphasizes her voluptuous breasts, and looks down at Subaru.

Minerva: "Your value or whatever has nothing to do with me. But, she's wishing for you to stay alive, so... and, didn't you see it too, in the second TRIAL?"

Subaru: "...But, the second TRIAL was my mistakes, the sins I committed."

Minerva: "Are you stupid? That wasn't something to make you take responsibility for the worlds where you messed up. That was something showing you how sad everyone was as a result of your

mistakes. —And wasn't that the answer you wanted?" Subaru: "—hw"

He remembers.

A voice, crying. A voice, rue stifled. A voice giving strong farewell. A voice

giving the usual, kind goodbye.

Whispers of love from who believed in him. The words of beginning, what were Subaru's motivation to fight.

None of which he was supposed to have had in his life.

Still possessing nothing, still having lost what should have been in his possession, was how Subaru believed he had been summoned to this world.

To prove his own worth, he needed to keep fighting. To protect those precious people he had acquired over that period of fighting, he needed keep walking further in solitude.

Only ever receiving from others—had been his supposition, but was he safe to think otherwise? Would they cry for him?

Would they lament their powerlessness for him?

Would they desire to see the future, and see it with him alongside?

Would they allow him the qualifications to stand, smiling, at the side of those precious to him?

These qualifications, of questionable possession.

But surely if he walked to the end of the road that he had been, obstinate and alone, he would not be permitted to have them.

At the end of his fight, conducted with a heart of iron and entirely unshakable mental fortitude, he would surely forfeit the tenderness required for any smile to rise on his face.

And so, was he allowed to believe?

The option to procure a future for those precious to him, at cost of losing his own heart. The option to frantically guard his own heart, at the cost of losing

the road to proceed.

Was he allowed to believe in neither, and instead in some greedier option?

The option to see the future of those precious ones, while simultaneously remaining Natsuki Subaru, was an option that existed—was he allowed to desire this, to believe this?

Satella: “—You're allowed.” Subaru: “—”

These are the feelings of Subaru, not left voiced as he sheds only tears.

But the timing fits perfectly, as if they had been communicated in sound.

Still collapsed on the ground, Subaru moves his head to look beyond Minerva—where he sees her, still fallen to her knees on the grass, the tears left unwiped on her face as she smiles.

Subaru still cannot see her face.

A veil of darkness blocks it, and Subaru remains unable to determine her expression. But, the fact that she is smiling does communicate.

Echidna had said it. That the reason Subaru could not see her face was because he was not accepting her. That her smile communicates is because his unconsciousness is determining something he truly is seeing as something he is not seeing.

Satella: “You saved me. And so, I will pardon that you be saved. I am wishing for you to be saved.”

Knowing that Satella's words, her voice, are permeating his fractured heart leads Subaru to bury his face in his arms. The tears had already made it a mess,

and unmistakably there would be no way for his face to get more unpresentable this late in the game, but regardless he wishes for nobody to see it.

After his incredible badmouthing of her, how was it that Satella's words still brought him relief? And how could he possibly show how his expression softened?

But that said, it was true that Satella's arcane words of LOVE or what call them had allowed Subaru to truly understand the TRIAL.

Echidna: "...It's surprising that Minerva broke through Typhon and Sekhmet's obstructions, but personally what surprises me more is you two."

Mutters Echidna quietly as she places Subaru aside as another matter.

Looking first at Minerva and her restored limbs, Echidna shifts her gaze elsewhere—to Typhon pinned beneath the claws extending from the black coffin, and the coffin's owner Daphne as she faces down Sekhmet.

Daphne: "It's un-mis-ta-ka-ble that I'm, the one with best a-ffin-i-ty, against Ty-Ty. The cen-ti-pede coffin has, no brain to think with, and it's my arms and legs. Ty-Ty's authority has ter-ri-ble compatibility."

Typhon: "Aug—stop it—Phinnie! Hnn! Auug!"

Sekhmet: "And so—haa—you're using your real body for holding me in check, then—huh? I'm not Echidna—haa—but just why are you pulling this stunt—huh? Unlike with Minerva, I don't understand your reasoning for this—haa."

Sekhmet scratches rigorously at her overwhelming, overflowing head of hair.

With Typhon practically taken hostage, not even Sekhmet can be careless here.

Daphne smiles, her pigtails swaying. Daphne: “We-ell,”

Daphne: “So silly Subaruun, he talked some p-re-tt-y big lip to me. A-ppa-rem-t-ly he, killed the White Whale, and next is the Sizeable Hare? Then, so I was thinking, I want him to at least make, it to challenging them.”

Echidna: “An interesting stance. If he ever feels the urge, he can indeed achieve that. You should be aware of that, too... do you mean you want the Sizeable Hare to be destroyed?”

Daphne: “Whatever? The mo-ment it split, a-way from me, its hunger stopped having a-ny-thi-ng to do with mine. It can be destroyed and it won't really bother me, but... maybe I am a little in-ter-es-ted in how the Sizeable Hare, my very in-ex-tinguish-a-ble starvation itself, will end.”

After all, says Daphne.

Daphne: “If ending means being fulfilled, that's a happiness complete-ly unknown to me.”

For a Daphne constantly tormented by endless hunger, fulfilment was an eternally unreachable dream.

The Sizeable Hare reflected her unending starvation, and was deemable as another version of herself. —Although, Daphne had absolutely no such sense of closeness to it.

Should the Sizeable Hare meet an end differing from the one Daphne did, would that end be a satiating one? Would there have existed chance for her to be fulfilled? Was the rare non-hunger kind of interest in her smile.

Echidna nods to Daphne's reply with full satisfaction, then turning her attention not to Subaru, nor Satella, nor Minerva. Not to Daphne and Sekhmet, not to Typhon, but to a somebody standing in a spot isolated from the commotion, as Echidna was.

Seeing the WITCH OF LUST Camilla, Echidna lightly strokes at her white hair. Echidna: "What about you, Camilla? Do you maybe have a reason, like Daphne did?" Camilla: "I-Is, there... some... something you're, t-trying to... say? E-Echidna-chan?"

Echidna: "It's simple. —You called to his consciousness as it was in the grips of death, moments before its extinguishment. You would have known what would come of it, when it was you with your authority FACELESS GODDESS doing it."

Camilla: "—"

Echidna: "Your call would have held every significance for him. And you would have understood that. And so I ask. You didn't think fondly of him. Why did you?"

Camilla puts her hand to her mouth, her gaze puttering about. That she directs her eyes to Daphne and Minerva is an action hoping for others to come in and back her up.

But there is no WITCH in this place that will be seduced by the all-beloved Camilla.

Camilla bites her finger in a 'nothing going' kind of way, her eyes watering as she looks at Echidna.

Camilla: "Th-there... wasn't, really... a reason? H-he, turned down... down, your ttemptations, so, I'm... all satisfied... a-and, even though every... everyone is, mad and... fighting, it's not... affecting me, so... but,"

Echidna: “But?”

Camilla: “L-LOVE is, so... important? I-It's bad t-to, ignore that... mm, you mustn't, do that. He might... be thinking he, d-doesn't want to... see it, but, there is... LOVE there... and when something's, there... I won't let, it... be denied. A-and, also, t-to me... null reciprocity is a hell no.”

Camilla speaks the final point alone with frightening clarity. Echidna shrugs. The WITCH OF GREED, smiling wryly, looks over the witches one by one.

Echidna: “Sekhmet and Typhon acted to respect his will, Minerva respected life and healed him. Daphne assisted in his prolonged survival for the sake of seeing his fighting spirit or what-to-call-it through, while Camilla utilized her authority to inform him of the love he'd constantly ignored. — Everyone and everybody has their various platforms, from which they attempted to aid Natsuki Subaru.”

Is how Echidna appraises the witches' actions, prompting the witches' expressions to shift.

Pride tilts her head, Sloth gives a listless sigh, Wrath snorts as she crosses her arms, Gluttony eats a leg from the coffin as she smiles, Lust's face twists in disgust.

And, having seen these reactions, Greed puts her hand to her chin. Echidna: “It truly is interesting. —Don't you agree?”

Echidna's mouth relaxes, a blissful smile rising on her face.

Her statement is aimed at the one directly before her—his body wavering as he stands up, Subaru.

Wiping his still-wet teartracks with his sleeve and having managed to stand, Subaru gives Echidna's question no reply.

His eyes look passionlessly over the witches. Subaru: “Seriously... just what are you all.” Witches: “—”

Subaru: “Curiosity. Sympathy. Pity. Duty. Disgust. Expectation. ...Basically none of your reasons for supporting me make any real sense. I get what the title of 'witch' means, here.”

Echidna: “If you're back to speaking insults, then have you perhaps regained your spirit?” Subaru: “...I don't know.”

Mutters Subaru as he puts his hand to his chest.

Those words very succinctly expressed all of Subaru's present feelings.

Subaru: “What I have to do is supposed to have been decided. Those things I have to do haven't changed at all. That's definite. Definite.”

But, he says, speaking to himself rather to anyone else,

Subaru: “I'd decided that this was the only method for doing it. That's what I chose... what I had resolved to choose. But even despite that, here the TRIAL broke me.”

The second TRIAL, the uncomeatable present—which speared Subaru with the consequences of his actions, while the reality he had used the word 'resolve' to distract from ripped his heart to shreds.

Having been shown that, Subaru further sought a clear rationalization, and had attempted to stick through with his resolve. And realistically, that was supposed to have happened.

Subaru: “But, learning your true motives after having once thought you someone whose help I could accept, and then right afterwards having Satella appear... my head is frazzled. All of you, stop going off just doing all these things. What I ought to do is something I am saddled with. Is what it's meant to be, but...”

This late, now made to cling to the life he had rationalized expendable, what was he meant to do? This late, now made to feel attachment to the life he had determined to use, what was he meant to do?

This late, now made aware that he was loved, what was he meant to do?
Subaru: “I have just, no idea what to do any more.”

If you don't die, you can't protect everyone! screams Subaru's rationality.

There are people who will grieve over your scouring yourself away, Subaru's memories tell him. He doesn't die, and people will sorrow. He does die, and people will sorrow.

Echidna: “—I will present you this question once again, Natsuki Subaru.” Says Echidna, her tone low.

Subaru looks up, to find Echidna standing directly before him, her finger raised.

Seeing herself reflected in Subaru's eyes, Echidna nods slowly.

Echidna: “Should I collaborate with you, you will without fail arrive at a future where those you want to save are saved. You'll surely lose the need for deliberation. Speaking in extremes, I will be reliable for solving the problems you will face. All you need to do is concentrate fully on implementing those solutions, and only on overcoming the barricades. If continuous deliberation is painful for you, the option is available for you to entrust all of that to me. I will not fault you for it, and in a sense I will welcome it. And so, I will present you

with this question once again.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “Having no clue what to do any more, would you let me guide your hand? My promise is that, without fail, I will bring you to the future.”

Says Echidna gently as she presents her hand to Subaru.

Looking down at her pale fingers, looking up at her awaiting face, Subaru's breath freezes.

This is the same proposal as what he has just rejected.

Subaru had learned of Echidna's true nature then, and been terrified of her mentality which operated only off of nigh-frightening curiosity.

But, how about now? Having had a short break, and then thinking calmly over what she is saying, how about it?

Treating his life as a consumable, going through every pattern of trial-and-error, forcibly surmounting the obstacles in his path via a rather heavy-handed method. Subaru's state after accepting Echidna's aid would be one of continuous fighting while his heart erodes—but that said, even should he decline her help, how would his state during his solo efforts differ at all?

Subaru had been stubborn, and unable to stomach his repulsion for her attitude, he had rejected Echidna.

But if he had the resolve to truly abandon everything and make himself a sacrifice, if he could just ignore Echidna's nature, what he should do is utilize her just as she proposed.

But even that his integrity had rejected. If he was headed along the exact same path regardless— then what exactly was the point of Subaru's relentless refusals?

He ought to take that hand.

Should he have the resolve to keep fighting without any fear of being hurt, swallowing down his pain and suffering, he ought to take that hand.

And so,

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “I'm afraid of being hurt.” Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “I hate pain, and suffering, and sadness. I don't want to go through awful experiences, I don't want to see others meet terrible fates. —I don't, want to die.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “And so, your hand which presupposes sacrifices—I can't take anymore.” Not even Subaru exactly knew what it was he could do here.

But he no longer seemed capable of choosing a path with the same premise as Echidna's.

He had wound up being aware that he did not want to die.

He had wound up learning that there were people who would accept him even without his death, when he had thought himself useless outside of dying.

Natsuki Subaru was a man whose worth was not only in dying.

Because the people who mourned Subaru's DEATH were not people mourning him while seeing worth in his DEATH.

So then, there was SOMETHING about him which made them mourn?

Subaru: "I still don't know what that something is. —But, I'm thinking to find out. Once I know what it is, I think I'll be able to repay everyone in a way other than DEATH."

Echidna: "...However, there lies a path of thorns, Natsuki Subaru. While it is truth that rationalizing death as a tool to cut open the way, proceeding along the route while scouring yourself down, is a

rugged path—it unmistakably remains as the shortest road for reaching the future. The only thing you need to offer is your heart. To deny this, and intend to keep your own heart as well as the future of those precious to you, is an act of extraordinary difficulty, and above all—

Cutting off there, Echidna takes a breath.

And, with the most resplendent smile she has ever shown rising on her face, Echidna: "—Greed."

Affirming his desires, the WITCH OF GREED accepts Subaru's decision with her expression pleased. This witch, having had her proposal denied but still smiling happily, is indeed beyond Subaru's understanding. But,

Subaru: "That you saved me countless times alone is truth. ...Even if it was entirely all you thinking of me like some lab rat or whatever, that is truth."

Echidna's presence had been a mental support, by which he had overcome

troubles. For being given those spaces of time to protect his mind, he was indeed grateful.

Echidna: “—Foolish, pitiful Garfiel is scared of the outside world.” Subaru: “...huh?”

Echidna: “What he saw in the first TRIAL has always been binding him. If you're to break through this situation by yourself, I'd say you'd need to undo that curse on him.”

Subaru: “Echidna?”

Echidna: “The other witches have been very friendly with you, and if I then present you nothing, what an outrage it'll be. Having you think THE WITCHES WERE ALL FUNDAMENTALLY GREAT GUYS, EXPECT THAT ECHIDNA SHE WAS JUST THE WORST is truly nothing I want. I may be me but I am still a girl, and that I'm fond of you is truth.”

Speaking quickly, Echidna lightly pokes Subaru in the chest.

Pushed a step back by the momentum, Subaru looks up to find Echidna averting her gaze. Her white hair swaying, the WITCH OF GREED steps away from Subaru.

The other witches, too, watch Subaru silently.

Subaru: “...You guys are all a bunch beyond anything I can understand.”
Witches: “—”

Subaru: “You throw my head into so much disarray I could go crazy, and even now I'm still fuming pissed about what you said. This whole time I've been thinking 'stop talking over my head about things I don't know', and I will never come to like you guys.”

Sincere thoughts.

The witches all had their respective and ironclad values, which Subaru—no, which any ordinary

person—would unmistakably conflict with.

And so Subaru could not comprehend them, or accept their actions with understanding. But just like what he thought with Echidna, an inability to comprehend, and gratitude, were separate.

Subaru: “Thank you for trying to let me die. Thank you for trying to not let me die. Thank you for letting me hear these important voices. —For these, thank you.”

As he bows his head to the witches one by one, the way they swallow their breath is rather satisfying.

Subaru then turns, walks.

Ahead of him, a girl remains on her knees on the grass—it is Satella. She looks up at Subaru and his approach, her breath holding to a stop.

Seeing her frightened, seeing her in exactly the state of a small young girl, Subaru loses his speech.

Why was it that when faced with someone he had thought abhorrent, his heart fills with warmth? What were these emotions he harboured for someone he had never even touched before?

This place had given Subaru far too many questions lacking answers.

Still without a single answer and choosing the option of CONTINUE

DELIBERATING, Subaru offers his hand to the seated Witch.

She looks at his offered hand, lost and uncertain.

Subaru: "I... have no idea what you are. I don't understand why you're telling me you love me, or what you're... or what you mean when you say that I saved you."

Satella: "Ah..."

Subaru: "But that the RETURN BY DEATH you've given me has saved me is fact. That I've fully relied on it, and doing so managed to get here is also truth."

Satella: "—"

Subaru: "RETURN BY DEATH is an option available to me... is what this all is?"
Satella: "—"

Subaru: "I won't make any simple rationalizations of it. —But, that you who gave me RETURN BY

DEATH, are what's made me feel I don't want to die, is unmistakable." And so,

Subaru: "Like you said, I'll try... just a little bit, try liking myself more. Try treating myself dearly. I have no idea what'll happen once I'm doing that but, that's okay."

Satella: "...Will you be all right?"

Subaru: "Yeah. Compared to dying, it's nothing."

Subaru answers to Satella's worried voice as he crafts a weak smile. Seeing his expression, Satella worriedly takes hold of his hand.

Instantly, the noise of the world breaking comes to Subaru's eardrums.

The sky's blue and meadow's green fade in colour, signalling Natsuki Subaru's release from the castle in a dream.

Subaru: “—Back outside, then.”

What he's doing, and why he's here, are vague.

He will exit, and then what should he do first? The issues of his heart had made even this question into something unclear.

Satella: “Don't deliberate alone. Please, with those who think you dear alongside...” Subaru: “—”

Satella: “With the people who don't desire your death, the people who desire not to let you die, fight alongside. ...And when even that isn't enough, die without forgetting what it is to fear death.”

Subaru: “—”

Satella: “Please don't forget—that there are people, who will grieve your death.” The world is cracking to pieces.

Satella's voice grows distant. That fact rips at Subaru's heart terribly.

This palm in his hand is frightfully hot.

He must not let this hand go, is the feeling he has. Subaru: “—I,”

He cannot get the words out to call her.

His call to her, his call of her name, is not coming. You must not voice that name, says his desire to reject her, as it fights with his desire to accept her.

The sky is falling. The ground is breaking. Light abounds, the surroundings no longer the shape of the castle in a dream.

The other witches have vanished from here, leaving this world to only Subaru and Satella.

He was fading. And beginning.

—Directly before him is Satella, Subaru unable to say anything as he keeps her in his gaze. Subaru: “—”

The veil of darkness falls.

The ebony he had supposedly been unconsciously rejecting is dispelled. Revealed from beneath is her face, which in seeing, Subaru swallows his breath.

Satella's silver hair sways, her amethyst eyes narrow, and with tears falling from their edges— Satella: “And one day—no matter what, come to kill me.”

Departing. Disappearing.

The world vanishing, even the sight of the girl before him falling invisible. Subaru: “I, no matter what—”

But gripping down firm on the warmth of her palm, Subaru— Subaru: “—Will save you.”

Facing the unseen, darling girl, that alone does he assert.

Intermission: The Guest Of Honour Has Left

Sekhmet: “Have to wonder whether you're—haa—okay letting them leave like that—huu.”

Echidna: “It was his decision, his choice. And I would prefer to respect that ...Though that he left while taking the hand of that thing is something I do have some unkind thoughts about.”

Echidna shrugs in reply to Sekhmet's listless voice.

As always the two are inside the castle in a dream, the blue sky above suffering not a single alteration. The fresh breeze blows past, caressing the hair of the witches again without change.

—After the fracturing world swallowed Subaru and Satella, freeing them from the dream, the world immediately reconstructed.

Well of course. This indestructible space tied to Echidna's soul would remain in this state so long as Echidna existed. The whole thing amounted to nothing more than an extravagant production, with the two being cast offstage.

Echidna: “That said, when you fire off shots so helter-skelter I do have to feel some fatigue. It'd be a great help if you could practise a little more moderation when you're going berserk with the healing.”

Minerva: “I was just following my credo, healing wounds where I could see

them. There's no discrimination between humans or witches or creatures or birds or fish or bugs or witchbeasts, the wounds of anything living are my enemy!"

Echidna: "Yes, but unlike when in life, the burden for your actions gets placed on me. When you were alive the world was made to shoulder the burden, so then I'm sure even your imagination can figure how tough it is for me alone to bear it?"

Minerva: "Fatigue, or whatever kind of invisible blah I really couldn't be bothered about. I heal wounds. So it shortens the life span of the world or whatever, not like that's my problem."

As she crosses her arms, emphasizing her abundant chest, the other witches smile wryly at Minerva. From a glance, the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva would be the witch of sin who was easiest to like— you could even call her a harmless witch.

The entirety of her actions are only healing, and to enumerate number of lives she saved during her lifetime would require more than a 5-digit number.

—However, the one that brought about casualties of equal measure was also Minerva.

All the destructive energy from punching, kicking, biting and so on would be converted to healing energy once expelled from her. This algorithm was the authority of WRATH, and thus only Minerva was capable of performing this. Even Echidna, who understood its construction, could not reproduce it.

Minerva's healing attacks distanced every living creature from threatening threats. —In a sense her authority seems supreme, but such thinking would be mistaken.

The healing power triggered by Minerva's fists was the result of a coercive algorithm which twisted karma, and required an immense mana cost for each strike. That mana requirement was not any volume a single human could shoulder, and even for the witch Minerva and her magical groundings, the load was impossible.

So where does she get the mana for her attacks? The answer is simple: she steals it from the nexus of the world.

Ordinarily when people use magic, they inhale the mana in the atmosphere through their gates, convert it into magical energy, and again release it through their gates to cast magic.

In Minerva's case the gate isn't the atmosphere, but a direct linkage to the core of the world. Said in more complicated terms, the core of the world is a supernaturally great concentration of mana—call it the place where mana is created.

Minerva's attacks withdraw mana from that, converting it into strikes of healing.

Through continued repetitions of this act, mana which should be provisioning someplace in the world becomes unable to reach it. With a starvation of the mana which is important in constructing the world, an extremely dangerous possibility spawns for these unsupplied regions to suffer natural disaster and calamity.

The number of people Minerva had directly punched into health exceeded five digits.

—But the number of lives she had indirectly snuffed by bringing about natural disaster was on equal par.

And so the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva was the witch most regarded as dangerous, and considered an enemy by every nation.

Minerva: “When we're here, the only mana I can draw is the amount that Echidna has. I'm only able to cure and heal up until you're basically run dry, which is so lame.”

Echidna: “There shouldn't be any reason for injured people to be happening here in the first place. But with all the ruckus that's gone on here lately you could almost forget that.”

Minerva: “Right... yeah. There was a ruckus, for a little while.”

Minerva's energy fades, her loveable face sinking into obvious gloom as she looks up at the sky. Minerva: “Do you think he'll do okay? I am soo worried.”

Echidna: “What would unmistakably go okay was my hand which he rejected. Regardless, he'll be struggling frantically for everything to go well. Doesn't seem he can get the answer yet, though.”

Minerva: “What is that, that phrasing. You guided him so that he'd reject you, and then you're trying to hide your feelings from us, when we know what you're really thinking? That's just pointless.”

Echidna: “It wasn't really that I was trying to be rejected. —Since whether he declined or accepted, I would've been glad with either.”

Echidna seats herself at the regenerated table, clicking her fingers to produce a teacup, ferrying the steaming thing to her mouth.

Echidna: “I affirm choices, and the outcomes of those choices. I don't much think the particulars of how that choice came about as a problem. The reality of having chosen, the reality of having not chosen, those are what is important. Whether the outcome be bad or good, I can brag of my dispositional ability to enjoy either.”

Daphne: “But that doesn't, mean you don't, have your pre-fer-en-ces.”

A black coffin leisurely comes to stand beside the tea-toting Echidna. Daphne has at some juncture nested herself back inside the coffin, devouring the sweets on the table like a dog.

Daphne: “You say that you'll respect outcomes, but Idna-Idna wouldn't hesitate to guide toward an outcome that Idna-Idna wants to see. That you're glad with either is pro-ba-bly truth, but that you're glad it was this I bet wouldn't be truth.”

Echidna: “You have so very little interest in others, and yet you still manage to hit to the point, don't you, Daphne.”

Daphne: “Compared to the hunger constant-ly tormenting me, this just doesn't bear thinking. Haa, haa, munchmunch.”

Daphne surpasses the just sweets as she winds up eating the plate too. Echidna sighs at her, then turning her attention to the other witches as they start seating themselves at the remaining chairs. Listlessly, plainly indignant, timidly—and one with an extraordinarily stern look in their eyes.

Echidna: “You do look angry, Typhon.”

Typhon: “‘Cause you're not honest—Chidna. Not being honest—means you're a liar? And liars are baddies? Chidna—you're a baddie?”

Echidna: “I act sincerely in accordance to what it is I want. Telling lies is something I have no present recollection of doing.”

Echidna's roundabout phraseologies do not work on the young Typhon. Should Echidna get Typhon in a bad mood, she knew that everyone present would consequently be in danger.

Condemning criminals and judging sinners amounted to nothing more than a fragment of Typhon's authority of PRIDE.

But, seeing Typhon puff out her cheeks in assent with Echidna's mental tightrope walking, the next one to speak is a witch buried in a ball of hair.

Sekhmet: “Hiding your real intentions while speaking—haa—makes what you're saying not a lie— huu. Very convenient for you—haa.”

Camilla: “E-Echidna-chan... is, is really such... a huge, pain... i-isn't she...”
Echidna: “You two...”

Echidna scrunches her face beneath the concentrated attack. In seeing it, the other witches smile. The only one whose brows are still peaked low as they watch on is Minerva.

Sekhmet: Are you planning to be crotchety forever, Minerva? Of course we'd

all be talking together. You knew this'd happen if a sage candidate came...

Minerva: “Yeah I know, shut it. I'm saying I agree with having a real talk. Just, unlike you guys I'm not in a position where I can rationalise about it. I'd like you to understand that.”

Daphne: For Met-Met who hangs out all the time with Ty-Ty, she wouldn't understand. Everyone just spends way too much of their life on things that aren't eating.

Minerva and Sekhmet snort displeasedly at Daphne.

While the tea party between witches does preserves its kind of equilibrium, the attendants here are still all people with egotistic dispositions. More often than not they fail to see eye-to-eye with each other, and that the conversation turns into spats like this is nothing rare.

Notably Minerva, prone to jabbing out at anyone, and Sekhmet, who dislikes conflict, had more than a few verbal skirmishes. Every time, Daphne would interrupt with her disregard to conversational mores, hitting right to the heart of the matter. That the conversations would end like this, without any real conclusion, was ordinary.

Minerva gets mad, Sekhmet entertains her conversation, Daphne comes in with teasing, Camilla soothes Typhon so that she doesn't explode, Echidna watches on happily from aside—and Satella watches over them, smiling at the safety of the six others.

Those were the days from four hundred years ago, never to come again.

Satella went mad from the witch factor, Minerva died insane in a trap, Camilla

burned to nothing in a great fire, Daphne wasted to death in a sea of sand, Typhon drowned in a flood, Sekhmet fell down the Great Cascade as she decimated the Dragon, Echidna gathered their souls and yet remains bound to the present world in soul only.

This was an imperfect reproduction of those forever-gone days. Camilla: “Y-you look, sad... Echidna-chan. You look, very... sad.”

Echidna: “Hm? There's no reason at all for me to be sad. You're here, and I get my chances to interact with the outside. —No necessity, at all.”

Camilla: “A-are, you... okay, with that? We're... w-we're just, souls, so... we're not, really us. We're... mm, al-already... dead. There i-isn't, anyone... really with, you... Echidna-chan.”

Camilla's stuttering words strike Echidna momentarily silent.

—Echidna's power was what gave the witches, lost of their flesh and existing only as souls, their temporary forms in the form of mental bodies.

Echidna prepares vessels, and houses the souls in there.

But the souls are frozen in the state they were when they died, with not a single change afterwards. Was the Camilla Echidna was gazing at a visage that truly belonged to Camilla?

Drawing from their souls their pre-death reactions, manipulating their bodies to put on a show— could this not some form of playing dolls, instigated by Echidna's desires?

The witches did share Echidna's knowledge.

And how to explain that if not with the statement that their existences were produced from inside Echidna? —That said, this quandary was one Echidna had already thought to death countless times over.

Echidna: “Bundle of narcissism that you are, regardless of you being my friend it's unusual for you to be worried for me. ...Could his boisterousness and simpleness have influenced you, too?”

Camilla: “Au, gh... I don't, care, any more... Echida-chan you, idiot.”

Says Camilla, her expression disappointed, in response to Echidna distracting herself from her feelings.

Echidna involuntarily clicks her throat as she laughs at Camilla's reply.

Echidna's attitude attracts the gazes of those witches who had not been paying her focus. Showered in their attention, Echidna spreads her arms.

Echidna: “Now, I'm sure the tea party will go back to belonging only to witches for a while. His— Natsuki Subaru's—trespass in this place likely won't be happening again.”

Minerva: “And you're okay with that? Not like I'm really worried about you being lonely, but you did say that something at the end there. You're supposed to be really annoying about getting compensation or whatever for that.”

Echidna: “Compensation... right, there was that. That was my parting gift for him and his foreseeable tribulation. —If I told you such a thing, would you maybe laugh at me?”

Echidna puts her hand to her chin as she ponders. The other witches share a glance. And the witches nod, all simultaneously opening their mouths to speak —

Witches: “—Nope.”

Echidna: “Goodness, more people have recognized goodness in me than I thought...”

Minerva: “After all, you getting no compensation and just helping for helping's sake would never happen.”

Says Minerva with her arms crossed, to which the other witches nod.

Echidna closes her eyes at their consensus. She gives a cough.

Echidna: “My thought was I had incredibly many cases requiring of careful discussion with you all. Truly, what is that you think of me?”

Witches: “—”

Echidna: “But, well.”

Before the silent witches, Echidna drinks dry her cup, her red tongue licking salaciously over her lips.

Echidna: “—You're not wrong in the least.”